FATE IS A FOOL

Harriet T. Comstock

Phyllis Meeke

FATE IS A FOOL

BOOKS BY

HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

A LITTLE DUSKY HERO
A SON OF THE HILLS
AT THE CROSSROADS
CAMP BRAVE PINE
JANET OF THE DUNES
JOLINE
JOYCE OF THE NORTH WOODS
MAM'SELLE JO
OUT OF THE CLAY
PENELOPE'S WEB
PRINCESS RAGS AND TATTERS
SMOTHERED FIRES
THE MAN THOU GAVEST
THE PIPER'S PRICE
THE PLACE BEYOND THE WINDS
THE SHIELD OF SILENCE
THE TENTH WOMAN
THE VINDICATION
UNBROKEN LINES
FATE IS A FOOL

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Harriet T. Comstock

That grief breeds strength is but a sad disguise
To shroud our hopes that one by one are slain.
Fate is a fool: you suffered overmuch,
Silent in sorrow . . .

MONROE HEATH

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO

"THE TWO"

WHO BY THEIR FAITH AND UNDERSTANDING
HAVE MADE IT POSSIBLE

A FOREWORD

Fate, in cap and bells or hideous mask and shrouded form, plays its part. It causes laughter or despair, but oftener creates heroes than cowards. When courage strips it of its disguises, Fate stands revealed as a servant, not a master.

H. T. C.

FATE IS A FOOL

CHAPTER I

BARNARD LEE touched the call bell on his desk and instantly the well-trained office boy responded. That was the way things ran in Lee's offices. Never a hitch; never a delay. "Selection and Preparation," was Lee's slogan. "They secure perfect results," he declared.

"Ask Mr. Brooke to come here."

"Yes, sir."

While awaiting Brooke's appearance, Lee reread the handwritten letter he held, then placed it in the type-addressed envelope and—quite by accident, Lee's hand was moist—the flap stuck. This was noticed by Brooke later. It did not disturb him at the time—it made him smile.

The address on the envelope was: "Mr. John Tremaine, Courtesy of Mr. Brian Brooke."

Brian Brooke had, years before, been carefully selected and trained for the position he now held—that of junior partner in the law firm of Lee, Crawford & Brooke. Crawford, while holding large interests in the business, was, to a certain extent, a silent and absent

partner. He lived abroad, represented his firm there, and could be depended upon to speak and act, did occasion arise.

"You sent for me, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes. Sit down, Brian."

Brooke made a mental note of the familiarity. During business hours Lee usually confined himself to utmost formality.

"I want you to attend to a delicate and personal bit of business for me."

Brooke, quite at his ease, dropped his eyes and gave his entire attention.

"For years I have looked after the business affairs of a—Mr. John Tremaine." Lee glanced at the letter on his desk. "In a way, I am the sole representative of Mr. Tremaine, and his only adviser. Our relations are peculiar and, to a certain extent, secret. Something has arisen that makes me realize that it is best for Tremaine and for me, too, to introduce another into the—the business. Just how much of a part you may be called upon to play, Brooke, depends largely upon Tremaine."

At this Brooke raised his eyes and gave his senior partner the benefit of one of his calm, estimating glances. Lee returned it by an equally frank one before he spoke.

"I want you to deliver this letter to Tremaine; await his reply, and deal with the situation, while you

are with him, as you think best. I have absolute confidence in your discretion."

Brooke nodded.

"Let me see, Brooke. You did not take a vacation this summer, did you?"

"No. I prefer an autumn vacation."

"Have you planned anything definite?"

"No—nothing definite."

"Well then, all this may dovetail. Tremaine has a remarkable place up in Canada. Deep woods, you know, streams full of fish, a lake, and some excellent shooting. There's a good inn across the lake from him. When Tremaine went there, on account of his health"—here Lee frowned—"he was about the only civilized human being for miles around. It was, and still is, a big lumber district. There are camps scattered through the woods. About ten years ago some wealthy men built a hotel on the lake. It is run for the men, more like a club than an inn. Free and easy, you understand, but perfectly respectable. You might like to stay on there in case Tremaine's affairs develop."

Brooke's lips twitched but he did not interrupt.

"Hidden Lake Tavern, the place is called," Lee went on, his fingers tapping the letter nervously. "Across the lake are Tremaine's holdings. You take a train to Albany, then a side line to a station called Twombley's. At that point the lake boat awaits the

train and plies from hotel to hotel. The Tavern is the last stop."

Brooke was making rapid mental notes of details.

"When could you arrange to start, Brian?" Lee took up the letter and handed it to Brooke.

"How about to-morrow night? I have some things to look after here and at home, but I could start to-morrow."

"Fine!"

Both men got up, and as Brooke glanced at the envelope now in his hand he saw that the flap, either purposely or accidentally, had become moistened and the letter was securely sealed. It was then that he smiled.

"When Tremaine reads that letter," Lee said, moving beside Brooke to the door, "he may or may not talk. I have not seen him in years. If he talks I am sure you will deal competently with his—his confidences; if he does not talk, the business, let us hope, will be considered closed. I can rely, Brian, upon your relations to me in either case."

"Thank you, sir."

"By the way," Lee broke in, "Ivas is away. Left this morning."

Brooke got a sudden impression that Lee had disposed of his daughter for some reason or other and that her absence was, in a way, connected with this secret business.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had hoped to see her to-night."

"She asked me to excuse her. She will write. I advise that bit of vacation in Canada, my boy. Good-bye."

The following evening Brooke took the night train for Albany. A dreary drizzle set in and a chill was in the air. That, and the hurry and secrecy of his errand, affected his outlook on things and made him irritable.

He disliked confusion of any kind, and now that he had time to consider things he realized that he was going, utterly unprepared, into other men's intimate business, and he resented it. He now resented the sealed letter. Was that an accident? If not, what was it? Hardly an insult. A man does not insult or distrust one whom he chooses for such an errand as this.

The sealed letter was an accident, undoubtedly. That being settled, Brooke tried to read his evening paper, but it held nothing that interested him as much as the matter in hand. He began to speculate.

"Well, at any rate," he decided when at last he turned in for the night, "if this Tremaine does not talk there will be another closed incident in the firm; if he does, I will have an opportunity to test my training." This had an amusing aspect and lightened the gloom for a moment.

By morning the drizzle had settled into a steady rain that was swept in sheets by an east wind. It was

late afternoon when the train for the lake left Albany.

The trip to the lake was short and the small boat was awaiting the train. The captain, standing by the rickety gangplank, viewed his few passengers with distrust. It was too late in the season for pleasure seekers and any others were interlopers, or worse! The natives did not wholly approve of Hidden Lake Tavern.

"What landing do you want?" he asked Brooke. "Hidden Lake Tavern, I suppose?"

"Yes." Brooke shook the water from his soft felt hat.

"You're the only passenger for that place. It's the last stop. You'll find it more comfortable in the cabin."

Apparently the captain considered his duty ended and turned away while Brooke sought the stuffy little cabin at the foot of the short flight of steps. Occasionally during the trip the captain appeared at the narrow door and looked speculatively at Brooke but did not speak. At the end of an hour Brooke was the only passenger.

It was nearly nine o'clock before the boat slunk (there is no better word to describe its motion) up to a trim little pier. There were no lights; no one in sight.

The captain appeared at the stairway. "Sorter taking them by surprise, eh? That being the case, you might have waited until to-morrow. Here, let me have your bag. This is the Tavern."

Brooke and his bag were deposited on the pier; the captain turned to his boat, not even recognizing Brooke's good-night or thanks.

Taking to the only opening through the trees that suggested a path, Brooke, gripping his bag, started up the steep incline.

The wind had died down to a sullen whimper and the rain had ceased but the trees were dripping water at the slightest provocation. A moon was trying to get the better of scudding clouds and presently, off in the near distance, lights shone and sounds of dance music grew louder and clearer as Brooke made his way over the sodden path.

The last Saturday-night dance of the season was in progress at Hidden Lake Tavern and it was at its height as Brooke reached the porch and moved toward a long window opening into the ballroom. No one noticed him and while he gazed on the cheerful scene he again had time to shake the water from his clothing and draw some conclusions.

Girls in pretty evening dress circled by, closely enfolded in the arms of partners. The music was good; there were two men, and a girl accompanied them at the piano. They were really astonishingly good musicians for such a place and time. Brooke was keen about music.

The girl caught and held his attention—she reminded him of some woman he knew very well. It was

one of those baffling resemblances that trouble everyone at one time or another, but he forgot it presently in his interest in the girl herself.

She was a pretty thing. Tall and slim, her unconscious pose was charming and the graceful uplift of the head curiously attracted the waiting man. The girl was simply dressed in white; around her throat was wound, fantastically, the long stem of a water lily; the closed bud, like a delicately tinted pendant, lay upon her breast.

"That's an idea!" Brooke found himself more interested. He continued to stare, shook more rain from his clothing and took in further details. He was strong on detail.

Until her time came to strike the notes, the girl with the water lily seemed a thing apart; her hands folded lightly in her lap, her eyes drifting carelessly, unseeingly over the room. The swaying youths whirling by had no apparent interest for her, but she never missed a second when her time came and her touch was fine and sure.

The music rose and fell; the dancers spun by. There was a suggestion of roughness among a few and from the flushed faces Brooke decided that between dances there was a good deal of drinking going on.

It was stupid to stand there looking on, wet and hungry, but still Brooke stayed, and then, suddenly, as often the amazing things of life do happen, the

thing occurred that shook his rasping nerves rather crazily.

The girl at the piano raised her eyes, looked directly toward him, started; almost, not quite, lost a note, and then gave him the most bewilderingly lovely smile he had ever seen on a woman's face.

There were many times afterward when Brian Brooke declared that for the first time in his life he knew love at that moment. From over vast spaces he and the girl at the piano came together; they were overpowered by something too great for understanding—it completely absorbed them.

But at the time Brooke was definitely alarmed. He was shaken and confused. He half believed himself ill and he turned away toward the hotel office to register. The boy who carried his bags upstairs asked if he wanted dinner, but he decided that he would go at once to bed and try what a night's calm rest might do for his rebelling nerves.

Instead, when the boy had left the room, Brooke hastily unpacked his evening clothes, dressed as if Fate were driving him hard, and went again downstairs. This time he took his stand by the wide door opening from the hall to the ballroom. This was a better mental and physical angle—he did not mean to be an ass.

To his amused surprise the girl was now playing the violin—the violinist was at the piano. She was

even more of an artist with the bow. She seemed more alive, as if this instrument were a better interpreter of her talent. She looked lovelier, too, and the haunting resemblance had passed. Brooke lighted a cigarette and continued to stare.

During his absence there had been more drinking—the dancing was less steady, the faces more flushed. One young rowdy made remarks to the girl with the violin as he whirled by but she did not seem to hear him.

Eleven! The affair on the floor had become almost a riot but the end was near. Presently it seemed to collapse, as far as the dance was concerned. Couples drifted from the room; lights were magically dimmed; and the musicians turned from the platform.

Brooke watched the girl. She was going toward a rear door; so also was the young chap who had spoken to her in passing. He was rather the worse from the many drinks he had taken between dances. He had gotten rid of his partner, and was unsteadily following the musician.

Brooke was interested. He went around to the side of the piazza and found, as he thought he would, that the girl, after passing through a cloakroom, was coming out and running toward the lake—a long dark coat covered her. Lightly she ran over the wet path toward the landing; unsteadily behind her followed the youth in his evening clothes, the dazzling white-

ness of his shirt front gleaming now and then as the moonlight struck across it, for the night had become serene at last.

Events were merging into adventure and Brooke hurried on after the girl and her unsteady pursuer. At the landing she paused and turned. Perhaps her hurry had only been a ruse to cover a rendezvous. This thought held Brooke back and he took refuge behind a tree.

Then something occurred that brought him from his shelter with taut nerves and flaming eyes. The girl had bent to untie a small boat from the dock, her gaze still upon the man near her.

"What do you want?" she asked clearly, and there was no fright in her voice.

"You know what I want."

"I know what I want. I want you to leave me alone. I've told you that before. What do you think my—my father and uncle would do to you—if——"

"Oh! you won't take that course, my dear. What do you think the proprietor of the Tavern would do—if I did a little talking?"

"You have nothing to talk about." This came angrily, but with a proud toss of the head.

"Come—a kiss or two. What's a kiss? Let me hold you for a moment—I'll make you want to be held." The man went unsteadily forward.

The girl had freed the boat and was about to step

in when the man caught her. There was a struggle. Then, "Beast!" The word came on a sob. And at that moment Brooke was upon them.

Deftly he collared the youth and dragged him back; securely he gripped him and dipped him into the cold, dark water. Then he lifted him up, shook him, and remarked calmly:

"Beat it to the hotel. I guess you're a bit sobered."

"Damn you!" the boy spluttered. "You'll pay for this."

"I'm already paid. Beat it unless you want another plunge."

The young fellow, cursing and dripping, turned toward the house, and then Brooke looked at the girl.

The cloak had fallen back from her body—it hung, held by one hand, from a little bare shoulder; the dress had been torn away.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you very much." Then she laughed nervously and turned toward her boat. It had been under the awning and was quite dry.

"Let me." Brooke took the rope. "Shall I help you?" But the girl had lightly stepped down.

"I wish——" Brooke paused. "I wish you'd let me row you to where you are going."

"You may. I am all right, but I can't bear to be alone. I only go to the next landing. Fine nights, I walk—it's safer to walk; usually people are about."

Brooke stepped into the boat.

"I'll steer," said the girl.

The clouds were drifting away, the moonlight was now clear and steady, and a soft, warm wind was stirring.

Clustered about the lodge were several houses, for the most part closed and dark; stretching from the lodge and the houses on either side was deep forest. But across the lake lights glittered, and toward those lights the small boat was headed.

"Off there," the girl explained, "is North Harbor. It isn't much of a place but it is all that we have. It lies three miles from Hedged In—that's the name of our house. My father has a flair for names. The reason we can see North Harbor from here is because it is set on a hill. I do not know why it is named Harbor."

Brooke appreciated the girl's efforts to put him at ease. Now that he considered it, she had rare poise and refinement. His interest grew.

"You—have always lived here?" he asked, pulling evenly and strongly upon the oars and trying to take his share of the conversation.

"Hardly. I cannot say that I've ever lived, really lived, anywhere. I've been at school in England. It wasn't the kind of school in which one lives; it was supposed to fit one for living—somewhere, sometime —but it hasn't."

"I see. And you've come here?"

"Yes. It's rather queer to find, now that I'm set free, that I've landed at Hedged In."

"You've only just come?"

"Oh, no! I've been here a year or so. Before that I spent a few vacations here; that's all."

Brooke let his oars rest. He was amused. "And—you have not learned to live during all this time?"

There was a pause and Brooke felt reproved, but the girl was evidently more afraid of silence than she was of confidences.

"If you can call it living," she said, with a little laugh, "I suppose, in a way, I am learning. I'm always trying to take root—but the soil's rather barren. There!" Relief sounded in the girl's voice. "Row strong. I'm going to head in and we'll be carried up on the beach. It's pebbly and shallow."

So suddenly had the journey ended that Brooke felt mentally breathless.

"The lights deceived me. I thought we had a long way to go."

"No—here we are!" The boat grated on the stones; the girl jumped out, pulling the rope with her.

"You may take the boat back," she said, "but please send it over early in the morning. I'm to play at the church services to-morrow. And thank you for all that you have done for me."

"I think," Brooke replied, "that I'll walk back. It cannot be far."

"No, and there's a good trail on the lake edge, but it will be wet—the trees will drip. You'd better take the boat."

"Thanks, I'll go by the path."

"All right, it passes our house. I can start you safely."

They went up the slight rise of beach and at once struck the trail that led into the woods. A little farther on a house, almost hidden by a rough fence resembling a stockade, stood forth. There were lights in the windows of the lower floor; there were no curtains at the broad windows and within could be seen the figures of two men seated by a roaring log fire.

"This is Hedged In." The girl spoke quietly. "My father and uncle are sitting up for me. They always do. I wish they wouldn't. They seem to consider it a duty. Things are not often as bad as they were to-night, Mr.——"

"Brooke. Brian Brooke."

"As they were to-night, Mr. Brooke. That Toflin boy is a beast. I'm an outsider to most of them. He was drunk or he wouldn't have broken through the code. You see, in a place like the Tavern you either belong or you don't and everyone respects the code. It would be quite awful if it were overlooked. It's like being on a desert island, you know."

"And you do not—belong?" Brooke and the girl

had reached the gate of the rough, sheltering fence. The moonlight fell full upon them.

"No—I do not belong. Good-night, Mr. Brooke, and again thank you very much. I would ask you in if I could, but we do not have visitors often and you might, you know, be something of a shock so late at night. Are you staying long?"

This was asked courteously and to soften the abrupt good-night.

"Perhaps. I've come on business, partly. I am bringing a letter to a man by the name of John Tremaine. Do you know him?"

The girl started and drew back. "My father is John Tremaine," she said slowly, and Brooke saw her face twitch. "I am Vallé Tremaine. This changes things—will you come in?" She stood aside.

"Not to-night. Set me on the trail; I will come over to-morrow. Good-night."

Brooke was a good deal shaken, and once he was alone in the woods he lighted a cigarette and tried to think straight. The following of the trail helped to steady his unruly nerves, the constant splashes of water upon his bare head did much to cool him, but in spite of all he was aware of having been carried out of his orbit, and to a man like Brooke that had the effect of light-headedness.

He reached the Tavern and went to his room. Only

a sleepy clerk at the desk had noticed him. He slowly undressed and flung himself upon the bed.

"Well, I think I can call this a day," he muttered. Then: "I hope Tremaine will talk! I'll be hanged if I don't stay until he does talk."

CHAPTER II

BROOKE slept well and late. He got up feeling that, however far he had been carried out of his orbit the night before, he was thoroughly readjusted after his hours of rest.

He went to the house telephone and ordered breakfast in his room. He took a cold bath and dressed carefully. Off in the distance people were singing a hymn—"Lead Kindly Light."

"One step enough for me"—this made Brooke laugh. How jolly asinine the whole thing was, he thought—this Sunday-morning farce after the night's debauch. It was Sunday morning, of course, wasn't it? A drunken revel the night before and this solemn cant to-day; and that girl was accompanying both. Yes, she had said she was to be at the organ. He remembered it all now.

Brooke debated, seated at his breakfast, whether he should wait until the services downstairs were concluded and then try to meet the girl, or go at once, by way of the trail, to that house behind the stockade.

He decided upon the latter course. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was only a little after eleven.

" 'One step enough for me'!" he found himself humming.

"All right," he agreed, "that suits me." It gave him confidence to feel so facetious.

Out of doors the beauty and peace were compelling. The weather was such as a day in early autumn should be. The trees were glistening—red and gold—and the path strewn with leaves was like a stretch of Oriental carpet. It was no morning for hurry. A delicious sense of having plenty of time and a hunger for the open air made the walk through the forest a delight.

As Brooke approached the Tremaine house he saw that its windows were set wide to the sunshine and free breezes. A splendid yellow coon cat lay stretched on the broad piazza before the open door leading into the largest room he had ever seen in a private house. Several dogs were prowling lazily about, and just then, from out the rear of the house, a figure of a man appeared. The man was pitifully lame and the twisted back was humped at one shoulder. But from where he stood Brooke could see that the face was fine and handsome; the long hair was brushed carelessly back, the deep eyes were gentle, the mouth firm and patient. It was difficult to guess the man's age. He bore a dish of food in his hands, and calling the

dogs to him he set the dish down and stood watching the animals eat. There was dignity, even nobility, about the lame man, and when Brooke emerged from his place the startled eyes instantly rested upon him, but with courtesy.

"Good-morning," Brooke said, advancing. "Are you—John Tremaine?"

"No—I am Stephen Tremaine, his brother."

"I came from New York." Brooke was beside Tremaine now. "From Mr. Barnard Lee. I have a letter for Mr. John Tremaine."

"Come in. My brother will be down soon. Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes, some time ago. I've been tramping in the woods. I'm staying at the Tavern."

"You could have rowed over. Come in. Will you smoke?"

Brooke took a chair by the fire and accepted a cigar. The cripple made no move to summon his brother and, after seeing the visitor comfortably seated, went painfully across the room to where a table, laid for breakfast, stood.

"I'll fetch hot coffee," he said. "Excuse me."

Brooke looked about. The big room gave the impression of open space rather than an apartment. The four walls did not seem to confine, they emphasized space. The massive chimney lacked all attempt at beauty; it was simply a setting for a fire that might be

large or small. Just now it was a small fire—a clutter of sticks that seemed lost among the ashes of other fires. The furniture was rough, much of it hand made, but it was comfortable and answered every purpose. There was a good deal of it but there was no sense of crowding. The windows were immaculate but no curtains or shades hung from the frames. A curious stairway made of logs, the split side answering for risers, led, evidently, to the bedrooms. There was only a lean-to kitchen beyond the main room. "A place in which to find shelter," thought Brooke, "not a home in any sense." And he recalled what Vallé had said about not really living. But there were books scattered about and a piano stood in a far corner. They looked out of place, somehow, in the rough room.

Stephen Tremaine took long in his preparation. The stillness became oppressive; the ticking of a cheap clock on a shelf sounded loud and harsh. And then, quite as if the cue for his appearance had been secretly given, John Tremaine appeared at the head of the stairs and, seeing a stranger below, stopped short. The startled look that had been in Stephen Tremaine's eyes now marked John's. Almost, Brooke thought, Tremaine looked frightened: the stare was more than one of mere surprise.

"You—you wish to see—me?" The voice was a fine one and it matched the handsome face and figure—it was the voice of a gentleman.

"You are John Tremaine?"

"Yes." Tremaine was descending; he had regained his poise.

"I have a letter for you from Barnard Lee. I am the junior member of the firm." Brooke drew the letter from his pocket.

Tremaine took it and with an "excuse me," tore it open and read it while standing. He had not thought to offer his hand; apparently he regarded Brooke as a messenger, nothing more.

Brooke watched him. There was nothing else to do, the informality was disconcerting. The letter was not long, and after the first moment of interest Tremaine's face became blank. But his absorption was complete, his indifference to his guest's presence equally so. Brooke began to resent it.

Tremaine reread the letter—his face resumed its ordinary aspect of quiet dignity. "Excuse me," he said again, and then, to Brooke's amazement, tore the letter into bits and tossed it on the fire!

Was he going to talk? He was not. At least, not about the letter.

"You are staying at the Tavern, Mr. Brooke?"

"Yes, I came last night."

"I—I have heard of you from Mr. Lee." So then it was not ignorance that had prompted Tremaine's attitude! "He—he has great hopes of you; he places great confidence in you. Pardon my seeming discour-

tesy. The letter you have brought was—was, as you may know, most important. However——"

"I know nothing of the contents of the letter," Brooke hastened to say. "In this case I am simply a messenger. I judged, however, that the matter was important." Now, would Tremaine talk?

He would not, but he looked relieved.

"You are remaining at the Tavern?" he asked.

"I am at your service, Mr. Tremaine."

"Thanks, but the letter needs no reply. The business, for the time being, is settled, but if you are not in a hurry—the woods at this season of year are delightful. I would ask you here but, as you see, my home is rather crude. Still——" Tremaine paused. A subtle change was overcoming the former anxiety, a light of sudden interest came to his eyes. He smiled at Brooke. "I think you might enjoy a week or two here. My brother, daughter, and I live like hermits, but there are some remarkable lumber camps round about, the hunting is good, the air splendid."

Brooke was watching the expressive face. Almost it seemed that Tremaine was pleading with him to remain.

"I should expect you to take your meals here. We are excellent cooks."

"He may want time to reconsider," Brooke thought, and then quietly said:

"Thank you, Mr. Tremaine, I accept your invitation with pleasure."

At this point Stephen Tremaine came in from the kitchen bearing the coffee pot.

The next hour was the strangest one Brooke had ever experienced. It was tense, unreal, and yet he felt himself being drawn into the dull life of the place. He drank several cups of coffee, the best almost he had ever tasted; he listened to Tremaine's remarks about the place and people. Stephen moved about saying little but intelligently giving the impression of being perfectly at ease and interested.

"My brother, my daughter, and I are like jammed logs," Tremaine was saying as he nibbled toast and sipped his coffee. "Here we are. I suppose it would take dynamite to dislodge us. There is no reason for our being here—but there is no reason for our getting away either."

"You came here for—for your health?" Brooke ventured.

"My health? Yes, mine and my brother's. People largely come to the Harbor for their health and then they form the habit of staying unless other business interferes."

"You have been here for some time?"

At this Tremaine turned his clear, calm eyes on Brooke. "Twenty-odd years," he said. Then, as if considering, "Nearly twenty-two."

There was a little more casual talk and then Brooke rose.

"I must be going." He suddenly realized that he did not want to meet Vallé Tremaine just now and he would leave it for her to explain or not the adventure of the night before.

"I would like to have you meet my daughter." Both Tremaines were following him to the door. "But we dine at seven—you will be here then?"

"Thank you—yes, Mr. Tremaine."

After Brooke had left John Tremaine went out into the woods without making any comments. Stephen turned to household tasks. There was a light luncheon to prepare. John would probably not return—he rarely ate luncheon at home. Then there was the seven o'clock dinner; that must be of the best. Stephen's brow contracted. It was never easy for him to plan a meal, he cared so little for food himself—but for that very reason his efforts were always successful.

Vallé returned from the Tavern. She was in her gayest mood—a mood tinged with yearning—and it always made Stephen wince. It was like the effect of an amiable child to win and hold attention that was really not hers.

The girl was excited. There had been such a droll preacher. "He seemed to have his tongue in his cheek all the time. He wasn't a bit like Kemel Trench," she

said. "I do wish Kemel could go for the people up there, just once."

"He'd be arrested," Stephen replied, a little gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"Is Kemel coming to dinner?" Vallé noticed the table laid for four.

"No, a man from the Tavern is coming—a Brian Brooke."

"Oh!"

"He's come from New York. He's brought a letter."

"Oh!" Vallé decided to keep her secret. Brian Brooke had apparently kept his.

John Tremaine did not return. At one o'clock Stephen and Vallé ate some sandwiches on the porch, the dogs begging for crumbs near them.

The afternoon was a busy one. Homely sounds from the kitchen were mingled with violin music. Stephen never permitted anyone in the kitchen when he was working at high pressure. Vallé would do her share later, so she practised. As she played, standing by the open door, Stephen from his kitchen noted the clear, fine notes and smiled. He had taught Vallé—he knew the joy of the master.

The dinner at seven was a real achievement. John Tremaine was at his best. He had changed his clothing after his day in the woods, and while it was not up-to-date, it was fine and well kept. Stephen was in sport

togs but their loose fit hid much of his deformity and put him more at ease.

Vallé was a picture. In thinking of her afterward Brooke believed that she was merely draped in some soft, yellow stuff. There was not the least suggestion of such clothes as Ivas Lee wore, but she was lovely. Her hair was short and curly. It was the brightest brown Brooke had ever seen—brighter than Ivas's. It looked as if wind and sun had free way with it. Her eyes were almost golden and the brows and lashes were dark; her skin was smooth and faintly tinted. Vallé never tanned or burned.

As the evening went on Brooke expanded, began to enjoy himself. There was much laughing and there were moments when John Tremaine's wit flashed brightly. At such instants Stephen glanced at his brother with surprise and Vallé bent her head, smiling vaguely. Evidently the meals at Hedged In were not always so cheerful.

After dinner there was music. The remnants of the feast were hastily disposed of and, for the time, forgotten. Sometimes Stephen Tremaine was at the piano, sometimes Vallé. They played equally well—piano and violin.

John Tremaine, sitting by the fire smoking, looked on. He watched Brooke's absorption and smiled. A sense of power grew in him. He felt like a master who

might, with a little care, direct a delicate situation to a successful finish. Presently he said:

"Sing, Vallé, some of those English ballads you found in the old country."

"Father, my singing, you know, is my weak talent. Uncle Steve couldn't train me in that. I lack confidence."

"Please sing, Miss Tremaine." Brooke's voice was pleading.

"Oh! well, take it as it is." Then, turning to Stephen, the girl said, "Accompany me on the violin, Uncle Steve, and when I weaken cover my defects."

And then she stood by the broad open window—the night was warm and the fire on the hearth made open doors and windows a necessity; her face grew quiet and tender. Behind her the shadowy forest lay like a grim background. Somewhere off in the distance a night call of a bird broke the outer stillness. The violin sounded faintly like a spirit guide, unfailing, unobtruding, and Vallé's voice broke into sound.

It was not a great voice, not entirely a true one—Brooke, trained only by the best of music and that indirectly, sensed this—but it was a voice that found the heart and sang to the heart. The ballads were simple enough, things that the people of some peaceful hamlet had long ago made classic.

"Another," Brooke pleaded when the first was ended, "unless you are tired."

"I am never tired." And Vallé sang again and again.

At last the bewitched evening came to an end. Brooke departed after many thanks.

"I'll have breakfast at the Tavern," he said, "but will come over later. Perhaps you will show me about a bit." This to Tremaine.

"Gladly. Or Vallé will. She's a famous guide. She has the wood sense. She never misses a blaze. Such a sense is a gift of heaven, it never is really acquired."

After the guest departed Vallé went toward her room. Her eyes were dreamy; she walked slowly. On the stair landing she stopped. It was never easy for her to speak intimately with either her father or Stephen.

"Who is this Brian Brooke?" she managed after a moment's shy pause.

"A junior partner of a law firm in New York," Tremaine replied without turning his head. "The firm manages my—my small affairs. Something rather important turned up."

"I hope, Father, that it has been a success for you."

"That remains to be seen, my dear. Good-night."

And then John and Stephen Tremaine were alone. Stephen pottered with the fire. The night was growing colder—the logs must be placed just so—air a-plenty between them—the ashes cleared from under.

Without looking at his brother, Stephen presently

spoke. "The letter——" He hoped John would let him see it. He had read John's to Barnard Lee.

"I've burned it. Lee has absolutely turned me down."

"He would. I warned you, John."

"I know you did, but it had to be done. Lee's reply was an insult, of course. He believes that I lie—he threatens. If any further attempt is made he will end all relations—money relations—between us."

"Of course——" And still Stephen kept his eyes on the fire; but as surely as he knew anything Stephen knew that his brother's busy brain was planning, plotting something. There was a vibrant tone in John's voice, a certain steady note of power tinged with amusement. The lonely day in the woods had not been spent idly. John was like that. He took long hours for hatching an idea, but when it came forth it was perfect.

An expression of kindliness spread over Tremaine's face as he regarded the twisted back of his brother. "This young Brooke knows nothing," he said at last. He was about to take Stephen into his partial confidence.

"So I gathered."

"It's strange, Steve, what comical twists Fate takes sometimes. I often wonder why we poor muddling creatures ever really worry."

"It's Fate that muddles," Stephen broke in. There

was something in his brother's voice that made him alert.

"Unless it is—understood, Steve."

"And you think you—understand?"

"I know that I am no longer afraid of Fate, Steve. I wish I never had been."

"And now, how about this twist?" Stephen turned from his task, crept to a low stool and sat hunched by the hearth, his splendid eyes on his brother's face. Those eyes compelled now. John Tremaine grew serious.

"Steve, back of us, back of Fate there is a Power. You know that, so do I—this Power is an Expert."

"I do not follow, John; not quite."

"Lee has hardly been aware of Vallé's existence for years, Steve. I dare say he thinks her still in England. It would be like him to think I made my demand—my explanation—before she got involved here."

"Well?"

"He has sent Brooke, his chosen and well-trusted man. In case I broke bounds this Brooke could be depended upon to—to handle me. If I did not break loose this young henchman could also be trusted to close the door and lock it!"

"And not be curious about what the locked door conceals, John?" This came doubtfully.

"Certainly. I know Brooke's type. Rather a fine type, splendidly trained, intelligent, ambitious. Bar-

nard Lee has a daughter and yet, with all at stake, Lee has sent Brooke here and Fate has set the stage. Brooke and Vallé—quite a thrilling situation, eh, Steve?"

"This won't do, John. Since you have failed let me take a hand. I agree, Vallé cannot stay here."

"A hand? What do you mean, Steve?"

"Let me take Vallé away for a year—two, perhaps. I think——"

"I cannot remain here alone, Steve. We've gone into that. You know my limit. I'd go mad."

"We could get Trench to come here and stay——"

"No, Steve. I will not run the risk of madness. Anything short of that—but not that. Besides, just for curiosity, what in thunder could you two do?" There was no brutality in this, merely a pertinent question.

"Vallé could teach until she had proven herself."

"Teach whom?"

"She might even play for someone who would understand and appreciate, be willing to help genius," Stephen ventured further.

"Steve, your heart is bigger than your brain. You've been ossified here. I do not wonder. But you'd be no use to Vallé out—beyond!"

A pause fell between the brothers. Steve arose, went to the kitchen and brought in food—John liked a late supper.

"I've kept it warm," he said. "Take some, John. You look beaten."

John Tremaine drew the small table toward him upon which a covered plate stood. "Thanks, Steve. I'm famished but not beaten."

Stephen crouched again on the hearth by the fire and waited.

"Good God! John, what's your game?" he burst forth at last, unable longer to control his growing sense of danger.

"I have no game, Steve." Tremaine lifted a cup of steaming coffee to his lips, his hand was steady. "As you have just said, I've played my last card—and failed."

"You're going to throw Vallé into the arms of this stranger?" It was out—the fear, the premonition, had taken on form.

"Oh, come now, Steve! Vallé's hardly the kind to be thrown into any man's arms. We've watched her, you and I. We know how she's steered her course with those young scamps, and old ones too, at the Tavern. Vallé has the safety of intelligence and pride."

"You're going to let——"

"Steve, I told you I'm not going to do anything except stand aside. See here, old man, stand aside with me and watch the game. We can afford a—a—holiday. Have you ever seen a clever gamester overlook, in his sense of power, the trick that would have won

the game? Seen him lose by his own conceit? If you haven't—just stand aside with me now and look on."

"But Vallé, John, are you thinking of her in your defeat?"

"I'm thinking only of her—as I thought of her mother before her."

"But she may learn to love this man—she's starved for what she has never known or tasted. She's never met anyone who has tempted her. If she does——"

"It's possible that Brooke may learn to love Vallé."

"And—ruin her? Good Lord, John——"

"I've sized him up. He's not the ruining kind, Steve."

"But—Vallé!"

"Vallé isn't the moon-calf you think her, Steve. She's handled those young cubs over at the Tavern rather deftly for two summers. Think back, old man. Does she let them compromise her? She does not! Has she ever permitted them to confuse her position with any other? She has not. That English school was a damned fine institution. Steve, I've given the girl a pretty fair education along certain lines too. I've made her understand exactly the worth of her assets and I've painted rather an alluring picture of the Promised Land beyond the pale of—of Hedged In. The school tried to make a little nun of her—but did not. Vallé is safe."

"You're discounting human nature, John—and sex passion." This came bluntly.

"I think not, and remember you and I are close at hand."

"As if that counted!" this with contempt.

"It does count—to a certain extent, anyway."

"You're playing a mad game, John. A wicked one."

"I tell you again I'm playing no game at all—I'm through. I'm merely standing by and watching others play. I threw my last card when I wrote to Lee a month ago. I counted the cost to you and me. He might, if he had one grain of human pity, have accepted Vallé and left you and me to rot here without his benign help." Tremaine gave a harsh laugh, then went on: "But Lee has made his decision, Steve, and now you and I can watch the working out of his defeat."

Stephen got up from his stool and stood close to John. In his pitiful deformity there was that suggestion of power.

"John," he said slowly, weighing every word, "let us go away—the three of us. What could Lee do? We could go abroad—lose ourselves—make a new start."

"What money have we?" John asked calmly.

"I've saved a thousand."

"How far would that take us and keep off the wolf until you and Vallé could make a fortune? There are wolves abroad, you know. Remember, old chap, our

income ceases when we leave here. Keep facts in mind while you—soar."

"John, I feel disaster near us."

"Simply a change of wind, Steve. Better take a dose of that nerve stuff."

"My God, John!" Stephen moved away, he was overpowered.

John sat on before the fire and gazed into the ruddy depths. Now that Stephen was off the scene his own doubts gripped him. Stephen had power to trouble his depths. He had not however discounted youth, nor plain human nature; he had, perhaps, overestimated them. He knew the training he had put Vallé through, but he also knew how quickly training turns tail when passion takes the lash in hand. He, to a certain extent, knew men—remembered men (this came bitterly).

Young Brooke was a fair gamble; but at twenty-five, or so, youth is swept aside at times, and in an emergency what could be demanded of Brooke? He was Lee's chosen confidant. One could rely upon that, but Lee, put to the test, would stand by his man. Brooke's ambition and self-interest must be taken into consideration. He was no cur, of that Tremaine felt sure, but he had already gone far upon a successful career and Lee's disapproval might cost him more than he would care to pay—even if human nature carried him beyond control for an hour.

And Vallé? Tremaine winced. There had been a

time—it seemed like another incarnation—when he believed he could estimate women, but how far could he rely upon that? Life had changed so damnably—young women, perhaps, most of all. Stephen was right. If Vallé were tempted—really tempted—what might she not do? She must not play into Lee's hand! At this Tremaine got up and walked about the big, empty room. Lee might have fumbled his cards, but he might still get control! To get control after a near defeat would be victory indeed and Lee, driven to bay, would play high stakes.

The gray morning was pressing against the bare windows of Hedged In when John Tremaine went noiselessly to his room.

CHAPTER III

BROOKE's literal interpretation of a vacation in the woods was beginning to get on Barnard Lee's nerves. And then, too, Brooke's management—or lack of management—regarding the errand upon which he had been sent was irritating, to say the least. The first week a brief note had come stating the bald fact as to the reception of the letter that had cost Lee such hours of bitterness and rage:

"He read it twice—and then tore it in bits and threw it in the fire."

"He did, did he? Damn him!" Then Lee read on:

"Since then there has been no reference to the matter and it begins to look as if there were to be none. The weather is superb, the woods fascinating. Acting upon your good suggestion, I am staying on for a week or so."

Just why Brooke did not mention Vallé Tremaine in that first letter he could not have told, but having omitted her, it was more difficult to introduce her into the second, which was dutifully sent the following week:

"Unless business of importance requires my immediate return, I will prolong my stay. I discover that I was more in need of a vacation than I realized. As a matter of fact I do not recall ever having had a real vacation such as this. The woods certainly are menders of souls."

Lee pondered over that communication. No mention of the Tremaines—perhaps he had shaken himself free of them and was staying at the inn. "Why in thunder couldn't he say so, then?" he muttered. "Besides, there's something sentimental in that mender-of souls idea utterly unlike Brooke!"

Lee was worried. He almost, at that point, decided to send for his junior partner. He even estimated the wisdom of concocting some important business abroad. That would give color to the need of haste and would still offer a new opportunity to enjoy a vacation at less risk to Lee's own state of mind. But on second thought he felt this step would not be wise. Crawford would naturally complicate such an action.

"What business? Why was not I consulted?" he would ask. Of course Crawford could not be expected to look with favor on any such move and he would resent it.

But Lee was distinctly uneasy. The fact that there was no apparent reason for his unrest did not clarify the situation. What was Tremaine up to if he was not talking? The more he thought of the matter, the

more Lee decided that there was reason for worry and he must find it out.

He had brought Brooke's letters home from the office and he was sitting now in the little circular room to the right of the library where his more personal business was conducted. It was a charming little room with one curved window opening into the back garden where some early autumn flowers, still gallantly resisting the light frosts that had touched them, bloomed gayly.

Somewhere in the rooms above Lee could hear the voice of his daughter, Ivas. The girl had a curious way of making her presence felt—it was more like feeling than hearing. She stepped lightly always, but there was quick irregularity about her movements that was like a bird in flight. She sang, and very well, too, in snatches—a bit of an opera, a music-hall favorite, a hymn, or just a sweet trill that was like wood notes.

Lee listened now and his face grew strangely tender. That daughter of his was the only thing on earth he loved—all that was left for him to love! He had saved her from the wreck. The rest had been swept from him before he had learned to prepare and control! For Ivas he had gone to the depths and had struggled to the surface. But she had been too young to know and it had been the business of his life to keep her from knowing until such time as he chose to take her into his confidence—if that time ever came!

Lee devoutly hoped she would be so securely *his* that nothing could seriously affect their relations. She must never turn on him as her mother had!

After his early experiences Lee had learned the fine art of preparedness, disguised and perfected. From the time when, single-handed, he had undertaken the care of his daughter, had dedicated himself to her happiness and the establishing of a fortune for her, he had never relaxed his determination to gain his ends. She had been a delight from the first—a sunny, sweet creature with plenty of character and a lovable and loyal disposition. She had been kept at home with nurses, governesses, and well-chosen housekeepers until she was seventeen and then she had gone to the finest of finishing schools. Lee had become a rich man by that time.

While Ivas was away Lee had concentrated upon details of business and even struck out courageously into the social world that heretofore he had shunned —and with reason. It was during those schooldays of Ivas's that Lee had discovered Brian Brooke. He had decided to take him into his office and train him to carry on. That carrying-on idea became a passion. Crawford was safe and highly desirable but out of the question when nice distinctions had to be made. He was apt to strike out for himself—well! he could have the old world in which to express himself and enlarge the business. Brooke gave great promise. He was from

the first ambitious and of fine caliber. Nice distinctions seemed to be his birthright—he made few mistakes because he felt his way with clear eyes and a sense of loyalty. And he early discovered in Lee Brooke many attributes that he admired and trusted. A splendid combination-investment, was Brooke! At first Lee had no very distinct ideas where Brooke was concerned except to train him as a private secretary who might, in due time, become confidential. Not only Lee's interests in the firm, but the personal details, involved some rather grim skeletons whose bones must not be rattled and the doors of whose closests must be discreetly guarded. This made it imperative that he have some wise guardian who could always be depended upon. One never could tell about skeletons or unguarded entrances, and Lee did not expect to live forever.

Gradually, Brooke surpassed Lee's hopes of him. He had been taken early—he was only twenty-two when he graduated from college. He was so subtly imbued with ambition and so deftly placed, in order that he might view the prizes on ahead, that he developed not only into a promising business man, but a loyal and devoted friend and admirer of Lee. Then it was that Lee's ever-reaching desires embraced Ivas in his scheme of things.

Why not? Why not indeed? But when Ivas graduated from the finishing school she appalled and dismayed her father by insisting that she was only just

begun and craved college and heaven knew what else, as means to a very definite end. In short—a career!

Looking back, Lee could congratulate himself upon his management of the critical moment. A false move then and he might so easily have weakened the tie that through all the years he had woven by love and single-hearted devotion.

The years of separation had given Ivas Lee a broad and comprehensive view of something that her father never suspected. She knew that there was some tragedy in her father's life. Once only had he referred to her mother.

"My dear," he had said then, "when you are old enough to be just as well as loving, I will tell you what there is to be told."

Somehow that quiet promise had turned the girl on a course of reasoning that while largely false still affected her. Upon graduating she was prepared to take her father into her partial confidence.

Lee never forgot the day she came into his study to outline her future for his dazed contemplation. She was exquisite. Tall, graceful, and perfectly dressed, thank God! she bore no resemblance to her mother.

"Father," she began, "I just cannot let you go on planning for me—trips abroad, bewildering parties, and oodles of money for me to squander. You are a perfect duck, my dear, and as far as possible I want our lives to run close."

Lee felt as if he had swallowed too large a piece of none-too-tender meat, but his dignity did not desert him. He leaned back in his chair and regarded his lovely daughter.

"I shall never marry!" Ivas continued, and this did not ease the choking sensation.

"What have you against marriage?" Lee asked.

"Several things."

The gauntlet was down.

"For instance?" Lee asked after a dull pause.

"Hard to say, Daddy, just convictions."

"Have you formed other plans—based on convictions?"

"Yes."

"Am I intruding, if I ask what they are?" A glitter came to Lee's eyes and his lips curled as he continued to gaze upon his daughter.

"You can never intrude, Father."

"Well, then, have you chosen a profession—a career, my dear?"

"I have, yes. I want to be a doctor—a surgeon, really."

Somewhere in Lee's brain a cry seemed to echo, "My God!"

But Ivas went calmly on: "There will be long years, Father, of preparation. That has troubled me."

"It looks to me like an eternal separation, my child;

but even so I must not stand in the way of your success—your happiness."

"Father!" But Lee stayed her by a warning hand.

"Let me make myself clear, Ivas. I will not be an obstacle to you. All your life I have had but one aim in view—your happiness—and now that I realize that you have outstripped me I want to prove my determination still to help you. When you go away I will close this house, most of it, at least, and live largely at my clubs. During the brief intervals when you are with me we can reopen the place. Even after you are qualified to hang out your shingle, this neighborhood would not be desirable for the office of a rising female surgeon. Besides, I could not endure the smell of drugs and the cries of anguish——"

"Father, are you making fun of me?"

"Lord no! Ivas." Then, after a pause, "You are young, my dear, and I am growing old. I wonder if you will grant me one favor?"

"Of course, Father."

"Let us have one year together—or a part of one. After that I stand aside. I've worked and planned for this, have prepared the office force for my absence. Ivas, will you come abroad with me?"

For a moment the girl hesitated. The fire of ambition and independence flamed hotly, but the quiet, ageing man near her made his silent and strong appeal.

"Yes, Father. One year is a very little time to give after all the years of devotion you have given me."

And what a year that was! Barnard Lee quite dazzled his daughter. She had never suspected him of such charm and delightful moods. Why, he danced with her, and marvelously well. His purse was always open for her greedy little hand, and when she began buying antiques for the old house Lee made no remarks—simply searched out new shops and opened his purse wider.

And then when they came back and things, many things, rose up and alluringly tempted, Ivas Lee did not turn a deaf ear to the lure. It was a thrilling experience, that of being the head of her father's house —and then, there was Brian Brooke!

Thinking all this over now, Lee, with his daughter's voice lightly ringing through the house, knew a certain glow of triumph, but he was too wise a soldier not to take into account the necessity for guarding the citadel he had taken at such cost.

Presently Ivas Lee came downstairs, still humming a popular air.

"Why, Father!" she cried, coming across the hall. "Home at four o'clock? What does this mean?"

"Ivas, I wanted to have a talk with you if I found you free. I see——"

The girl came into the room, moving with that uneven grace of hers that was so charming. "I am free,

darling, to you. I was simply going out to shake off a tendency to blues."

"Blues, my dear?"

"Oh, yes. I'm developing the common traits of my sisterhood." Ivas flung her coat and small hat aside and sat on the arm of a chair across the table from her father.

"Oh, letters from Brian?" she said, eyeing the correspondence spread out before her father.

"Yes. And you, have you heard from him to-day, my dear?"

"No. Yesterday."

Lee watched the face lifted courageously to him. It was such a frank, lovely face, not as beautiful as it was lovely.

"And may I ask—is there any news?"

"He talks about the girl a good deal. She seems rather to have caught his imagination, and Brian is usually so unimaginative about girls."

"Girls—girl!" Lee repeated in a tone suggesting recovery from a narcotic. "Girl—what girl, Ivas?"

"He has not mentioned her to you, Father?" For some reason this seemed intensely significant and Ivas bent forward, her large, troubled eyes fixed upon her father's face.

"No. Who is she?"

"Why—Vallé Tremaine he calls her."

"Tremaine's daughter!"

"You do not know her, Father? You do not know of her?" It all seemed so tremendously important. Both Lee and Ivas grew tense.

"I know of her—yes." Lee was answering something in himself. "Of course I know of her. I thought she was in England at school."

Ivas saw that her father was really not heeding her at all. His quick mind was reaching back and back until the strain absorbed him. He had discounted Vallé Tremaine! Tremaine's preposterous demands concerning the girl had been blurred as to detail. He had not dreamed of her being with Tremaine.

"Now that she is through with school," Tremaine had written, "this is no place for her. . . ." And then the insulting, astounding statements. Lies, of course! And all the time the girl was there in the deep woods. Was this a plot? A counter-charge? Why—the girl must be nearly as old as Ivas!

"My God!" muttered Lee, and over his face an expression of dumb helplessness passed as if he had been defeated by an unworthy adversary. Then he rallied.

"What do you know of this girl, Father?" Ivas stood up. She had always taken her blows standing. Somehow her attitude brought back to Lee all the girl's gallant spirit when facing her girlish problems.

"Nothing, my dear, except that she is the daughter of—of bad stock. Her father is—is—or was a

criminal." The time had come, perhaps, for Lee to surrender his shield of silence, but he meant to do it with caution. He was regaining his poise. He was not going to be taken off guard again.

"She is not a criminal, Father?"

"I hope not."

"She's not responsible for her background."

"Don't be a fool, my dear." Then Lee asked a blunt and hurting question. "My dear, do you love Brian Brooke?"

Quite simply the answer came: "Yes, Father."

"Does he know it? Has he——"

"He has never told me that he loved me, if that is what you mean, Father. We've been so much together, taken so much for granted——"

"My dear, my dear—you must telegraph to Brooke at once. Tell him to come back."

At this Ivas Lee seemed to withdraw from some tangible effort her father was making to control her.

"You do not understand me, my dear."

"Oh, yes, I do, Father. You are afraid that Brian may get entangled."

"I am old enough to know danger, my child, when I see it, and wise enough to avert it if possible."

"And you think, Father, that under such circumstances as you fear I could recall Brian?"

The handsome young head was lifted, the troubled eyes darkened.

"But, Ivas, you must see——"

"I do see, Father, and more and farther than you suppose. The man I marry must want me more than he wants any other woman. If he does not——"

"But the daughter of Tremaine!"

"I'm sorry, Father, but this business of yours and Brian's has taken things out of my hands. You must see that. I know nothing of these Tremaines. How much or how little you confided in Brian I do not know. In any case he must be trusted to—to protect himself!"

"Ivas!"

"Oh! I understand and I have great confidence in Brian once he grits his teeth and tackles a job. You know what I mean. You have tested his qualities—you know his mettle. Do you think I *could* call him off now?" Ivas Lee laughed. It was a laugh that hurt her father.

Then suddenly he changed his tone, his face grew stern. The time had not come for revealment, but the time *had* come for coöperation. "You understand, my dear, that what I have told you is absolutely confidential?"

"What have you told me? Oh, about this girl's father? Yes, certainly."

"Ivas, I was once Tremaine's friend. I still am his business confidant and—and adviser. In a way I hold

his safety and future security in my hand. I have tried to be tolerant and merciful; believe that, my dear, now and always. But Tremaine betrayed every confidence I placed in him. Naturally any complication such as—as this which we have touched upon is appalling."

"Father, I'm terribly sorry. Of course I know your sense of honor and justice is great, and, darling, remember, my confidence must be respected no matter what happens."

Ivas came across the room to her father and leaned upon his shoulder. "We may be fighting little straw soldiers," she said, and her eyes softened.

"I hope so, my child."

"So do I. But, Father, may I tell you something because I am so young and wise?"

"Yes, my dear."

Ivas let her fingers pass gently over the slightly bowed head—the thick, silver hair was very beautiful.

"Darling, you are honorable—horribly so—and you are just, too—terrifyingly so—but you are not tolerant, you dear old thing. You are anything but, and sometimes I am afraid for you. Hate, a remembered wrong—are such—corroding things."

"Come, come, my dear, do not presume upon your youth and my honorable justice." Lee loved the touch upon his head.

"Father, I am quite, quite serious. You *do* dominate,

you have had to perhaps, but can you not see that you may get fearfully hurt sometime because things do not work out your way?"

"You see me like that?" And now Lee moved from under the caressing touch.

"You see, Father? You are now proving my point!"

Lee was angry. "I see that you are talking nonsense. I am no narrow bigot, my girl, nor a sentimental fool."

"No dear, but you want what sometimes those who love you best may not be able to give."

"And that is—what?" Lee was interested.

"Surrender, darling, utter and entire surrender."

"Ivas!"

After a troubled pause Ivas spoke. "Let's forget it, Father dear, forget everything. Take me out to dinner somewhere and to a play. Let's"—Ivas tossed her head—"let's make whoopee! We'll dance, too. I know a wonderful place where it's quite proper to take fathers and yet not too tame. Yes?"

Lee got up, stood in front of his daughter and put his hands upon her shoulders. "Yes—I'll come with you. You're a great girl, my dear, and a great sport. There's nothing in this world I wouldn't try to get for you even to the——"

"Breaking of all the Commandments! I know, darling, but there are just a few small items that I'd like to get for myself—or go without. Catch on?"

"Of course, but I might be able even then to shove things your way."

Ivas shook her head. "Oh! the hopelessness of idolatrous love," she said, and turned from the restraining hand.

CHAPTER IV

BRIAN BROOKE had written his first short letter to Lee while under the reaction of Tremaine's manner toward the message Lee had sent. Nothing else seemed of any importance and he desired to set the matter secure in what promised to be silence.

When he wrote the second letter several emotions swayed him and kept him from mentioning the name of Tremaine's daughter. Since he had not mentioned it at first, it was awkward to do it later. He had spoken of Vallé in his letters to Ivas, and she would naturally tell her father—there was no reason for putting too much emphasis upon so unimportant a matter.

The very insistence upon this proved the fallacy of Brooke's position and he knew it. The case was this: Something rather stupefying, or rather, galvanizing was taking place. It almost seemed as if he had been gripped by a tremendous force, shaken until all the native soil of his roots was freed, and then left to contemplate his roots, realize them—stretch them, vaguely, before gripping other and newer soil for future growth.

Brooke was vividly aware of things: the joy of awaking to the sound of the woods, creatures busying themselves about their homes preparing for winter and taking stock, the keenness of the heady air, the brilliancy of the sunlight and the solidity of shadows. It was like realizing sight and sound after a lifetime of semi-blindness and deafness. He had hitherto sensed things but had not been part of them. This amused Brooke. The capacity of being amused, too, was new to him.

"I might so easily have become a stuffed ass," he thought, lying luxuriously on his bed at the Tavern and contemplating the day on ahead. "I've been caught in time, thank heaven!"

And what had "caught" him? Perhaps the amazing personalities with whom he had come so unexpectedly into contact; perhaps he was caught, a little, because he was relaxed and open-minded like a stranger in a strange land, eager to understand a new language, new customs.

John Tremaine had taken him by storm. The culture and charm of the man; his wit, touched by a haunting sadness and lighted by a spiritual glow that often, Brooke believed, surprised Tremaine himself as much as it did others—all this was extremely interesting. Stephen Tremaine, too—fragile, sensitive, and desperately shy until his music stilled his own doubts and caught his listeners captive—Stephen was compelling.

And Kemel Trench. "Lord! what a man!" Brooke had exclaimed after hearing of Trench before meeting him. Tremaine told Trench's story very simply. It was the bold facts of the case that broke through and above words and glittered—there was no other word for it—whenever Trench appeared and quietly, vaguely tried to mingle with his neighbors.

"You see Trench got an awful throwback from the war," Tremaine had said. "He had his first church—a small one in a New England village—and was newly married. He had chosen the ministry because, as he put it, he believed in the doctrines of Jesus Christ as a practical and solid business basis. And when the churches went bally mad, when they were ordered to foreswear all they had preached and rushed into the fracas, it utterly dazed him. In many ways Trench knows no compromises. He reared on his hind legs and apparently delivered some surprising sermons. You'll understand this better when you meet Trench. It must have seemed like the performances of a serious-minded baby at a machine gun. He didn't care where he hit, or how. He just blazed out from his platform, holding to the plain statements of the calling to which he had allied himself. He had a stinging wit that carried his gunfire far. He told me of one sermon where he pictured the one and only true God utterly dumbfounded at the appeals of His children that they be upheld in slaughtering each other. It must have been

nuts to that small, perfectly righteous congregation. They didn't know what to do about him. You couldn't fight him or lecture him. You'll understand that, too, when you see him. And they couldn't budge him or shut his mouth. At last they decided to take him humorously and said that they would need his kind when the war was over. He hammered away during those years trying to make his harassed little congregation see the absurdity of preaching one thing and living another. I think he hoped, to the last, to kindle and keep alive a Christian spark in that small parish of his, and he wore himself out in the futile struggle.

"When the war was over, his wife having in the meantime developed tuberculosis, they came here sick and beaten. The mystified congregation insisted upon giving them a sum of money. Trench hated like thunder to take it, though he knew he had earned it, but it was the only way out for his wife whom he adored. So they came trailing up here one late summer and my brother somehow got in touch with him at once. Well—" Tremaine paused—"Trench has lowered the temperature of hell around here and managed to get a curious hold on us all. He's like a disembodied conscience and he always speaks his mind when he speaks at all. For one thing, the chap is so entirely human that everyone respects him. The jog he got about the war dislodged much that he had held sacred—the forms of religion, I mean. 'You cannot

preach a Santa Claus to men and women and then expect them to keep on believing it,' he told me once. 'The churches had their chance but flung it into the bloody hell instead. They're done for now—done for, forever. It may be a lingering death but the dry rot has set in.' "

Brooke was intensely interested. "This Trench and his wife—they have recovered their health?" he asked.

"The wife made the first winter—she died in the early spring. Trench gathered every little trinket of hers and with her picture fixed up a kind of shrine in the living room of his shack. I thought he'd gone mad, but it is the result of a bit of Romanism left in him, I suppose. For a time the poor devil tried to drink himself into oblivion. My brother pulled him out of that by simply standing by and bolstering up the dying courage and decency in him. And now Trench serves when and how he can. He has a sort of chapel where he preaches now and then, he buries the dead and keeps his faith with men and women, and for pastime he plays a flute with my brother and my daughter accompanies him on the piano and violin. You'll enjoy Trench."

Brooke found that he did, and the wonder and interest of the deep woods grew and caught him in the mystery of their gold-and-crimson beauty. The still, moonlighted nights, the fragrant, luring days wove their spell, and Brian Brooke, for the first time in his

life, detached from familiar surroundings and companionship, realized himself—the self that had been strengthened in its years of training but had never had opportunity of choice and clear understanding. No wonder that he could not write to Barnard Lee. What was there to say? The errand had petered out into nothingness; the vacation aspect flourished, but all that could be told when he went back.

The few letters to Ivas were a bit more enlightening. It was queer, Brooke thought, how easily he could write to Ivas and how little he now desired her. His aunt with whom he made his home was, he was ashamed to say, out of the present picture. He sent several telegrams to her, received two or three bewildered letters from her, and there the matter dropped.

Often Brooke did long for the presence of, or at least the comfort of confidential letters from, Keith Arnold—his one close man friend, a survival of his college days. Somehow he believed he and Keith would have more in common now than ever before. In a way he had always had to justify himself to Arnold in the past, but now there would be a certain common meeting ground. Arnold had always been so normally human. No two men could have been more unlike than Brooke and Keith Arnold in the past. Why they had ever been friends was the wonder and it had caused Miss Moore, Brian's aunt, many anxious hours. Arnold

was gifted, but indolent. He had an income that hampered his progress, but did not quite kill his talents. An orphan he was, overlooked only by an old aunt, who persisted in living on in semi-invalidism, and a firm of lawyers who managed the money end of Arnold's affairs but refused utterly to attempt any authority over the young man's habits.

So, with this loose rein which was occasionally drawn rigid if he spent too lavishly, Arnold had gayly managed to get through college and that was all. For some reason Brooke and Brooke's success were, from the start, of enormous interest to Arnold.

"You and my old aunt are the only really satisfying people I know," he often declared. "How you happen to be what you are I am going to discover; it is to be my life work. She lies stretched out on a couch, but knows more than any human being of what goes on; here you are, old man, young and alive, and you don't know anything."

Oddly enough, Brooke often, in these magically moving days, recalled Arnold's aunt—recalled two or three rare visits at her home with Keith. What an amazing creature she was! What dazzling eyes and what scintillating wit, and she had seemed abnormally wise. If the old lady were still living she could explain without doubt exactly what was occurring in the woods. This was sufficiently fantastic to bring forth a guffaw —she had probably always known what Keith had felt

about Brian's lack and would glory, rather rakishly, at his change.

Then it was that Brooke decided to get in touch with Arnold as soon as he went back, that was if Arnold was in New York, not in Africa or Timbuktu—places he was always rushing off to when he became bored; or at least so he gave out before vanishing.

"Not even taking his pajamas with him," his old aunt had once declared, smiling wickedly; "but I'd rather have him like that than any other way. He'll do something worth while some day. I know!"

Brooke suddenly believed that he and Arnold would be, in the future, magically necessary to each other. He did not try to understand why—he simply knew it and hoped Arnold was back from Egypt, or was it Africa? He thought he'd like to get Arnold up into the woods. Everything would be enthralling to him: the people, the place, and the wonderful weather! But Brooke took no steps to find out about Arnold just then. He luxuriated in the renewed sense of his friendship for Arnold and let it go at that.

When Brooke met Kemel Trench he got a distinct shock. Just what he had expected from Tremaine's description he hardly knew. What he saw was a man worn almost to a shadow by a strenuous life.

"It's quite remarkable," Trench replied, to a remark Tremaine made about his appearance, "how little

one really needs his body—the less there is of it the easier it is to do what is to be done."

Brooke was soon deeply attached to Trench and Trench gradually emerged from his shy aloofness and on long walks alone with Brooke became almost confidential. One day they were in Trench's cottage. A mere shack it was but in some subtle fashion the man had managed to give it character. There was a sort of rough beauty about everything and exquisite order and cleanliness prevailed.

"Not much like a man's place," Brooke remarked, looking about.

"Well—it isn't," Trench replied; "that is, not entirely. I like to think it is my wife's home. These things—" Trench went to a table placed between the windows and touched reverently, one by one, a book, a small tidy work basket, and a garden hat—"these were hers, the last things she had near her. I'm a bit superstitious, I suppose, but I like to have them handy in case——" He caught Brooke's eyes. "One dare not be too confounded sure," he added.

"Certainly not!" Brooke spoke with an assurance that, in a way, gave Trench confidence to go on.

"It's all rather tragic and pitiful to me," he said, "the attitude of most people concerning the—the future. They put up a fight against, not for, a better understanding. I should think they, who have got a bit ahead of us, would indeed hesitate about—well,

paying us visits. We are so afraid of them, so antagonistic. As far as I'm concerned, my wife would always be welcome and find her things convenient. She used to wear that hat out there under the pointed pine—I can almost see her with her book and sewing close by. She was very lovely. That is she!"

Brooke looked up. Over the table hung, in a home-made frame, the photograph of Eleanor Trench. Her name was written on the white mat.

"Of course, that was before she was really ill," Trench explained.

The face was fine—not in any sense beautiful, except as it had become so through the love of the man who would never forget her. Brooke tried to say something appropriate. He ended by gripping Trench's hand.

At last he murmured: "It is a great thing to love a woman as you loved your wife."

"Yes, about the greatest thing on earth."

There was an awkward pause, then Trench spoke of the Tremaines.

"A mighty interesting pair," he said, with some hesitation, "but the girl complicates things. This is no place for a young girl. She's been educated in England, prepared for teaching there, but insists upon staying on and trying to batter down the opposition." Trench laughed, then added, "I tried to do that myself, at first, but the best I could do was to crawl under. One

learns to take things for granted up here and ask no questions."

All this had interested Brooke deeply and he found himself taking more and more for granted and living to the full the glorious autumn days. When he did think back he was amused to find how the people and conditions, that heretofore existed, were more or less blurred, stood our indistinct and detached, relegated to minor positions.

He thought oftener and oftener of Keith Arnold and the haphazard but stimulating friendship of the college days; Arnold's crude sensing of the lack in their relations, his own indifference to the codes that Brooke in those days held sacred.

"You're eternally pulling yourself up to some ideals of others," Arnold often said. "Why in thunder don't you have some ideals of your own?" Then, with that old twinkle in his eyes, "You ought to get drunk, old man, and commit some small crimes—they would wake you up and give you something to repent of and teach you values."

Next to this vivified memory of Arnold, Brian began to think more of his own aunt who had loved his father and had persisted in loving him even when her sister, Brian's mother, not herself, was chosen. That had always seemed a fine thing to Brian, though how the knowledge had come to him he could not recall. He seemed always to have known it. Looking back, Brooke

saw clearly how that knowledge had, indirectly, been part of his education.

His aunt had taken him, when an accident had deprived him of both his parents at the same time, and brought him up with a devotion that apparently had given all and asked nothing. But now, Brooke reflected with growing conviction how his aunt had silently, behind a well-constructed barrier, demanded a great deal. A quiet, never relinquishing force had been exerted. In some subtle fashion Constance Moore had managed to impress certain ideals, expectations, and interpretations upon her nephew and he had not dared fail her! She who had given so much. That was it. Brooke understood now. He had not dared fail her, he had always felt too deep an obligation. He had not weighed the possibility of the rightness of his aunt's deductions. On the whole they had seemed sane, apparently unselfish, surely, but the pressure had deprived him of initiative. That's what Arnold saw—what Brooke himself, now, saw. His grimly determined college years had stiffened his fiber, but had not made it elastic. His sudden success with Barnard Lee had seemed to him a fitting proof and a gift to offer to his aunt and there had been a real joy in his ability to repay her in part for all that she had given him. He had determined to devote his success to her.

That tall, narrow house, so like Constance Moore herself—half ashamed, Brooke found himself smiling

at his own facetiousness—what a delight that had been to them both. It had justified what little imagination Constance Moore had and given her a positive life work. She had been a pioneer on the East Side of New York. She had taken an old wreck of a house ruthlessly but with unwavering vision, torn its insides apart and reconstructed it; not only that, but she had reversed its original plan. It was a real beauty spot now and it had drawn others to it and, in a way, given Miss Moore a reputation.

"You're a real creator, Aunt Con," Brian had said, fully expecting then to spend his life in the confines of the new home.

"No, dear, only an interpreter," Miss Moore had responded, "but this will add to what I will leave you by and by—not money, my dear, I do not mean that, but something worthy of you, something I have evolved for you."

And the Lees. There were times, now, when Brooke was positively shocked at his lack of feeling toward the Lees. They seemed somehow to have got outside a very definite and rigid circle; a circle he had reconstructed, as Constance Moore had the old house, a circle not large enough or elastic enough to include them now. Barnard Lee and Ivas! The two who had stood, in the recent past, as opportunity and possibility. Now they stood apart as surprised spectators.

Reaching this conclusion, Brooke sprang up one

morning from his bed and plunged into a cold bath. He felt almost alarmingly right about things; there were no regrets, but a growing desire to make himself understood.

Brooke and Vallé were going up to Silver Falls. Brooke remembered now. It did not much matter where they were going so long as they were going together, but it was Silver Falls that had been decided upon.

An hour later Brooke was at Hedged In. The dogs, all kinds and sizes, greeted him joyously and gavoted around him. Stephen Tremaine came out and stood on the sunlit porch to welcome him—but there were always reservations about Stephen that Brooke could not overcome; they irritated him.

"My brother has gone to a distant camp," he explained as Brooke came to the steps; "trouble again. The men send for my brother to settle difficulties that they should settle for themselves." Stephen spoke as if apologizing for his brother's absence—as if that really mattered!

And just then Vallé came out of the house. Brooke had never seen her before except in those strange and marvelous gowns she seemed to create by winding lovely material about her and fastening it secretly and bewilderingly, but now she was dressed in rough, rather soiled trousers, a dark flannel shirt open at the neck, and her pretty hair was covered by a decidedly battered hat. She viewed Brooke critically.

"You're too dressy," she concluded presently. "You'll spoil your nice clothes, and besides, you reflect upon my appearance."

"I'll break the duds in," Brooke said laughingly.

"If you don't mind," Vallé was in earnest now, "please go up into Father's room and take a—well, whatever you see hanging there that matches my rig, please!"

"But your father——" Brooke slowly came up the steps feeling that some power was compelling him. He was growing to feel that power whenever he was in Vallé's presence.

"Oh! Uncle Steve will pilot you. Father's clothes are just clothes and his room a sleeping place. Please! I cannot let you in for anything like the Silver Fall trail in that outfit. Fortunately you and Father are much the same size."

Stephen Tremaine turned indoors and Brooke followed. At the stairway Tremaine pointed up and said quietly, "My brother's room is to the right. Take whatever you need. You'll find things scattered about a bit; my brother left early."

John Tremaine's bedchamber was apparently a place, as Vallé said, in which to sleep, in which to dress and undress, containing a comfortable bed upon which to rest. A bare, clean chamber, with uncurtained windows, no superfluous furniture. Like all of Hedged In, it was curiously lacking in any suggestion of privacy.

The place seemed to exude the impression of having nothing to conceal.

"I'm getting light-headed," Brooke thought, "addlepated." But he chose a much-worn pair of trousers, a much-mended flannel shirt, and a hat so faded and out of shape that it was a mere head covering. Then he went downstairs and presented himself for inspection.

Stephen did not reappear but Vallé, dangling her long, slim legs, sat on the veranda railing.

"Now you look less awe-inspiring," she said. "I'm awfully sensitive to—to appearances. Come, let us start. This is our lunch." She adjusted a bag on her back.

"May I not carry that?" Brooke tried to take it.

"No, I'm your guide to-day. You'll need all your strength and freedom."

"And you?"

"I'm toughened to climb. The Falls are my favorite sanctuary."

The climb soon tested Brooke's mettle. It was a stiff and steady upgrade and after an hour conversation flagged. Going on ahead, Vallé hummed a little tune and occasionally made a remark.

"It pays—once we get there."

"I'm sure it must." Brooke kept his eyes on the straight, slim figure ahead. "And you come up here—alone?" he asked.

"Often. You'll see why when we get there."

"But is it safe?"

"Safe? Safe from what?"

Brooke could suggest no reasonable danger, so he laughed.

It was nearly noon when the rocky gorge was reached. From afar the sound of falling water had filled the otherwise silent and gloomy woods; and then suddenly the beauty broke upon Brooke's startled eyes.

Like a shimmering curtain the Falls lay straight ahead; the woods were less dense and the high sun lay bright and warm upon the silver sheen. There was an open space close by the basin of the water and near one of the many small streams that carried the overflow to the valleys below. In the space was a round, blackened spot.

"My fireplace," Vallé explained, and taking the bag from her shoulders, sat down beside it like a devotee before an ashy shrine.

"Can you build a fire?" she asked, smiling up into Brooke's radiant face.

"It's one of my few natural talents," he said, and bent to his task. He gathered twigs and light wood and placed them intelligently, conscious of the watchful and experienced eyes upon him. The silent climb had magically done something to Brooke—something that he dared hardly trust. He was excited and be-

wildered. He seemed to have traveled not only physically but spiritually, up and on to an amazing consciousness of dizzy unrealities. He had arrived, but the knowledge took all power of reason from him. He simply knew two or three big vital facts, or what seemed like facts. The silence was growing dangerous, but he dared not speak. There was only one thing he could think of saying and that, he dumbly felt, would sound like madness.

"You have quite enough fuel," Vallé, hunched near him, warned. "A small hot fire is artistic; a scattered one is foolish."

"This isn't going to be a foolish fire," Brooke retorted, his back to the girl.

"No, it doesn't look foolish—it looks professional. Where did you learn?"

"In another incarnation."

"With another girl?"

"No—a man. A college fellow. We did a lot of this kind of thing."

"Oh!" Then, and Brooke knew that Vallé was stretching out luxuriously under her tree, "It is good for this squaw to be served for once; usually she has to do everything for herself and eat alone, too. Eating alone is ghastly."

The fire responded with crackle and flash; it did not spread, it aspired.

Brooke turned. "Let me do the rest," he said, trying not to see the lovely face against the rough bark of the tree.

"The rest? Oh, the preparations? Very well. There are three chops to broil—know how to fix the spit?"

Brooke laughed. "Wait and see!"

"And the rest," Vallé said, "is easy. Just some sandwiches, a thermos of coffee—we're great coffee fiends—and I was weak enough to put in some little cakes. I wanted to show off my skill as cook. Usually I leave out frills, but Steve and I are competing with cakes. Shall I spread the paper from which we are to eat?"

"No, please. Let me do it all and regain my self-respect after seeing you tote that bag up the trail."

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Vallé asked. "I do not do it before Father and Uncle Steve. I do not know why. I sense their disapproval and I'm a real toady where they are concerned. I'm eternally wheedling them."

"I'd love to see you smoke. Got cigarettes?"

"Yes, thank you."

From behind him Brooke caught the fragrance of the cigarette. "They would disapprove?" he asked.

"I do not know. I take no chances."

The chops sizzled and were at last done to a turn.

"Now, then!"

They faced each other across the square of paper. The sunlight struck directly upon them; the silver

sheen was behind Vallé—the witchy sound of falling, falling water in their ears.

Vallé looked up and smiled that radiant, soul-compelling smile of hers.

"Don't!" Brooke heard the word from his own lips with surprise.

"Don't what?"

"Smile like that!"

"Oh! Let us give thanks then and eat."

They did and it somewhat restored them to a normal state of mind, though both were wary. Presently the wariness deserted them and left them with a false sense of security.

"Queer things hunger does to you," Vallé ventured.

"Hunger?" And then Brooke found himself vastly and uncontrollably amused. He looked at the girl across the remnants of the lunch—the remnants were really nothing but three small bones—they had divided the third chop—and a few crumbs. He laughed.

"Throw the scraps in the fire, Brian Brooke." Vallé's smile still hovered.

"Why add Brooke?"

And now the fire blazed, the last crumb was gone. Caution disappeared also.

"Very well—Brian, then. Do you smoke?"

"Yes, a pipe."

"Good. I'll light another cigarette. Isn't it wonderful?"

"What—Vallé?"

"This—the place, the day, everything!"

"Quite, quite wonderful."

Brooke rolled over and looked into Vallé's eyes. She was sitting upright, her arms rigidly encircling her knees as if anchored.

"I adore you!" he said, and somehow wondered why the Falls did not cease to flow. They did not—they sang on and on.

Vallé did not move, but her eyes widened and her smile trembled and quivered on her lips. "Yes, I know," she said at last, "and I want to—to talk to you."

"Need you?" Brooke made no motion toward her; in a way there was no necessity. He seemed to have been close to her since that first smile of hers when they had come together over vast spaces on the night of his arrival.

"Yes, I want to. I want to more than anything else on earth."

"All right. Go on—beloved!"

CHAPTER V

"We CANNOT explain some things, can we—Brian?"

"No, thank God!"

"I mean such things as your loving me suddenly and my wanting to tell you all that has been crushed down in my heart."

"Some things just *are,* that's all there is to it." Brooke was refilling his pipe but every nerve in his body was tingling. He wondered how long he could restrain the flood of emotion that was breaking down the dams that inheritance and environment had erected? Poor, flimsy things, laughably useless at a time like this.

"Would you mind telling me just once," he said, packing the tobacco in the bowl, "that you love me?"

"That's just it."

"What?" Brooke frowned through the smoke that rose from his pipe.

"Well, I must tell you about me. It's comically little, but it is important, perhaps most of all because there is so little; but the telling may make things clearer."

Brooke smiled. Vallé was distractingly amusing and she filled all space. There wasn't another human being in sight. It did not matter much what she said.

"Begin and end quickly, Vallé, my darling. There are limits, you know."

"Yes, I know." Again that smile and the sweet friendliness of eyes and mouth.

"Good Lord!" groaned Brooke, and clenched his teeth over the stem of his pipe.

"Your loving me—I know you do, Brian—just finishes me!"

"Yes? I had hoped that it might be the beginning of you."

Vallé did not heed, but went on. "You see I had about decided to go back to England and take the position awaiting me in the school where I was trained, where most of my life was spent."

"Yes?" That was all Brooke could manage, but Vallé did not seem to note the inadequate word.

"That beastly thing at the Tavern convinced me, the scene on the wharf, you know, when you entered in. I've fought them off: the boys like that one; and the older men who wanted to give me presents, they were worst of all; and the women who were afraid of me; and the girls who insulted me. I had come to the end. There was no use trying, so I had decided to go back and—and leave things alone."

"What things, my dear?" Brooke was interested now—it helped his self-control.

"My father's life and Uncle Stephen's. I do not belong in it. I do not know why, but I don't. I never have and I've always been trying to. I'm like that, always trying to catch on. They do not want me; they've done their duty always, but they've pushed me off when I've tried to—to clutch them."

Brooke dashed the ashes from his pipe and tossed it aside, then propped his head in his cupped hands and fixed his eyes on the face near him—it fascinated him, thrilled him.

"The first thing I can really remember, Brian, is that English school. It was a good one, a safe one; expensive too, I am sure. A few times Uncle Stephen came to see me. I know now that he must have hated to come—he is so shy, so sensitive. Two or three times my father let me come here. I think now he did it in order to establish me, in a way, at the school. He didn't want to make an unnecessary mystery of me. People were kind—very. What they thought I never really knew, but they liked me and were kind always—at school, I mean. I was invited to girls' homes but I was an outsider. I grew to feel that and hate it, most of all. I had a passion for belonging and was always trying to find something to belong to." There were tears in Vallé's eyes, but the tears did not fall and while he watched them Brooke saw them being

absorbed. That fascinated him and made his heart beat quicker.

"I was always a looker-on, but I became—can you understand?—I became selective. Watchers are either that or snatchers."

"I think I see what you mean, Vallé." Then, "You could not be a snatcher."

"Even if I could not have what I wanted I learned to know what I wanted, learned values, for the homes I visited were safe, good homes. Always I was conscious of someone's duty to me being well done. All that training made it possible for me to deal with things at the Tavern. I *knew* things instinctively for I had looked on. My father helped, too. He said a strange thing to me once—it was just after I pleaded to remain on here for a while and when I had taken the position at the Tavern. I think my father wanted to—well, reënforce what he felt I had learned. He said that there were two ways of getting past locked gates. If one wanted to get in and couldn't break the lock, one could climb over or dig under if it were worth while."

Brooke laughed. "That's clever," he muttered. "And did you ever find a locked gate?"

"They were all locked, Brian!" Again that mist over the smiling eyes.

"And—you've made a decision about climbing or digging?"

"That's just it. The choosing is so—so tremendous, and it mustn't involve others, you see."

"I don't see why. Locked gates are—are damnable; there should always be a good excuse for them."

"I think there is, Brian."

"Rot!" Again Brooke strained to hold back the rush of emotion that would, he knew, carry him and Vallé far.

"You see, Brian, my dear"—again the smile—"I knew all the rules of—of the game of the narrow little life that I was permitted to see, but I've never had the chance to—to apply them."

"You're going to, beloved!" Brooke's voice was hoarse.

"I don't know whether I'm climbing over or digging under, Brian."

"Does it matter, so long as you—we—get inside?"

"Yes, it does, Brian. If—if I really love you it would be heavenly to let you help me climb; if I do not, but am just seeing a way to gain what I'm dying to gain—then it would be beastly to dig. I might make all the beautiful things that have made you what you are, topple."

Suddenly, like unbidden guests, Brooke remembered his aunt, Barnard Lee, and Ivas. They seemed comically to be close—breathless after a long climb.

"This is all damned nonsense, my precious girl. Are you, though?" He spoke almost roughly.

"Not quite. I have known for some time, Brian—— One never can understand how such knowledge comes, but I do know that there is something back in the lives of my father and uncle that they are hiding. Such men as they do not come to such places as Hedged In and bury themselves, from choice. It is something disgraceful probably. I've worked out some sort of belief. I may be all wrong—but I believe there is disgrace and that in a way they are hiding and they have wanted to keep me away from it! I think my mother was involved. I have never dared to ask and, strange as it may seem to you, out of all this there has come to me a great love for my father and uncle. I understand that, in a wonderful way, they have paid whatever debt they owe and I can only prove myself to them by not seeking to know what lies behind their locked gates. That's all I can do for them. That was why I was going back to teach in England. I did not want to make them conscious of me, outside."

Brooke got up and stood over Vallé. "It that all?" he asked.

"That's all."

"You are coming with me, Vallé, my dear, you are coming with me. I do not care what is behind those—those locked gates, as you call them. All that I want is you. I'm crazily in love with you, my girl. You've set me free and we're going to make rather a splendid

life, you and I." And still Brooke did not touch her, but she seemed to strain up to him.

"But dear Brian, am I so bent upon getting inside that I am digging?"

"What does it matter, you blessed child? Any life that is worth while is a big chance, a thundering adventure. Don't you dare——"

Vallé got up and stood before him, her arms dropped by her side. "Here I am!" she said simply.

The afternoon from then on passed unheeded. In snatches Brooke tried to visualize for Vallé something of his life—the place to which he was going to take her.

"And soon!" he insisted. "You will come, beloved?"

"Oh, yes! But not now." Vallé had seemingly fallen through space and was resting on something solid for the first time in her life, but the fall had not utterly destroyed her intelligence.

"Not until you have prepared your people, Brian dear. Such a whirlwind as this that has swept us off our feet is always terrifying to people who have not seen it coming."

Brooke laughed. "Your fanciful talk, my child, has a trick of seeming like wisdom. Have you ever been to a big city, Vallé?" This came suddenly.

"I saw London twice—in fog. It was part of my education. Not the fog. That just happened. I was out of luck."

"Did you like it?"

"I couldn't see it. The fog made me feel wet and cold."

"New York is rather wonderful."

Vallé nestled closer. "I'm sure of that," she whispered. Then: "Your aunt? I expect she'll think the worst and I'll be a relief, I hope."

"You will be a blessing, sweetheart."

"Perhaps. I'll be glad if I'm not a shock. And this Mr. Lee who sent you here?"

"A very fine man."

"Is he, Brian? I have the strangest feeling about him. He's connected in some way with my father."

"He is your father's business man."

At this Vallé laughed. "That's the queerest of all. There are times when I think he is my father's——"

"What, dear heart?"

"Enemy."

"Hardly that, but anyway, you will find him delightful."

"Tell me about him."

It was then that Ivas took on proportions, for as Brooke described Lee, Ivas persistently stood close by.

"I sense quite clearly, Brian dear, that according to all the rules of the game you should have married this Ivas Lee; but then rules are so often smashed when a dear thing like you takes to unbroken trails."

Brooke bent and kissed the top of the sunny, tousled head on his shoulder. "Tired, sweet?" he asked.

"I'm resting, Brian. Climbing over the—the locked gate has rather taken it out of me. But we must go down! See, it is late—after four. It will be quite dark by the time we reach Hedged In. They'll be worried. They never let me see they worry, but it's a little game with me to think they do worry about me."

"You sweet, lonely, brave little soul!"

"You're wrong, Brian."

"You were that once."

"Perhaps, ages ago."

Apparently neither of the Tremaines had worried over Vallé's prolonged absence, and for some reason Brooke resented this. They should have worried.

Stephen was preparing dinner. He had taken his time over details and Kemel Trench was sitting by the kitchen window playing his flute.

John Tremaine was doing his best with the living-room fire. He glanced up at Brooke and Vallé, and Brooke fancied that a gleam, as from smoldering ashes, flashed in his eyes.

Vallé went upstairs to change her dress and Brooke, as if driven by a sense of hurry that would bear him to safety if taken at once, said:

"Mr. Tremaine, I've told your daughter to-day that I love her, that I want to marry her at once. I hope——"

Tremaine straightened and the log he held fell upon the kindlings that were sullenly refusing to ignite, setting them to wild action.

"Fire's a strange element," Tremaine muttered. "I never seem to be able to control it. Now Stephen——"

Brooke wondered if Tremaine had heard what he said. But instantly he realized that he had been heard and understood.

"You are sure of yourself, Brooke, after so short a time? You do not give the impression of one easily swept from his moorings."

"Some things are quite outside cool calculation, Mr. Tremaine. I am sure."

"We will talk this over after dinner." Thus dismissed, Brooke went up to Tremaine's room to change into his own clothing.

"Well, at least," he thought with satisfaction, "we'll have something to start with."

And all the time, Vallé from a room near by was singing a gay song.

With the sure sense that this evening was to be one of the last at Hedged In, Brooke was keenly alive to every impression. They took on enormous proportions as last hours, last words are apt to do. That song of Vallé's he was always to remember, and the bleak emptiness of Tremaine's room.

"I must go at once and come back as soon as possible." So Brooke mused, when later he watched Vallé

move about and gropingly tried to visualize her in her new place—hers and his. She wore that evening one of her draped gowns, blue it was, and when the firelight played upon it it grew rosy.

Stephen Tremaine almost sullenly served the dinner, refusing to enter into conversation. But Kemel Trench was strangely gay. He had never displayed this side of his nature before. He told several good stories and after dinner proposed music. Stephen seemed to expand, once the violin was under his chin; his eyes rested upon Vallé as she stood near by singing the songs, one by one, that Trench suggested.

It was ten o'clock when Brooke started for the Tavern. His eyes pleaded with Vallé, but she smiled and simply said good-night.

"I'll walk part of the way with you," said Tremaine, "and finish my smoke."

It wasn't easy to begin, for all the preparation he thought he had made. Brooke almost resented this. Why did not Tremaine refer to it? Presently he did, and with quiet dignity.

"About this thing you mentioned before dinner," he said. "Have you considered at all how this may affect your future relations to others—Barnard Lee, for instance?"

"Such a consideration is out of the question. It could in no way affect my relations to Vallé. I love her very sincerely," Brooke returned.

"I do not doubt that. Vallé's a girl a man—men, even—would love."

"She loves me, Mr. Tremaine; I am sure of that."

"Perhaps. After all, she has had no experience with men, or life."

"I am quite content to—to trust the future."

At this Tremaine laughed pleasantly. "You would, Brooke," he said, "and I do you the credit of believing that you'd conduct yourself creditably whatever happened. You see, I once lived in your world and I remember it fairly well."

Somehow this made Brooke's nerves tingle. Perhaps Tremaine was going to confide whatever it was Vallé suspected. It did not matter except that Brooke felt that he would like to prove himself intelligently, not blindly. He was not one who cared, for himself, to know all there was to be known; it could not greatly affect him one way or the other. But for Vallé . . .

"I am prepared for whatever comes," he said quietly.

"I wonder if one ever is?" Tremaine asked, and there was a half-amused note in his voice. Then: "You may be rather severely tested, Brooke. I can say this. Vallé is fine through and through—finer than I could have believed, her training being what it has been, artificial in a way. But you must take her, if so you decide, wrapped in some mystery."

"I've sensed that, Mr. Tremaine."

"It would not be fair for me to speak openly of—of my own life. Too many are involved. My course was carefully chosen years ago and I see no reason for changing it now, not even were it to secure Vallé's happiness. I may say that my decision was made before Vallé's birth and partly because of her."

"I understand. At least I appreciate your position, Mr. Tremaine. As for myself, I think I can give you a satisfactory account. I'm rather commonplace—not at all exciting."

Tremaine laughed lightly. "I know a good deal about you, Brooke. And I may say this, knowing what I do: You show rare courage and quite unusual unselfishness in taking the course you have. I know Barnard Lee."

Brooke flushed. "My private life is entirely my own affair, Mr. Tremaine," he said with spirit.

"I hope so."

"And I may add," Brooke pressed his point, "that, romantic as it may seem to you, my acceptance of your terms and Vallé's, for she told me this afternoon much that you have told me now, are but a small proof of what I feel."

Tremaine bowed his head. "Thank you—and Vallé," he said. "There is a reason for my living here as I do. The reason is an old one, all but dead, perhaps, but there may be live embers. I do not intend to fan them into life. My brother shares my exile from choice."

Tremaine seemed to bring this confidence forth from a sense of justice, weighing every word.

Brooke hastened to put the strain to an end. "Mr. Tremaine," he said quietly, "this is all unnecessary. I am prepared, as is Vallé, to go on with our lives and respect your silence, always."

"And the others!" Tremaine spoke quietly.

"That is our concern, Mr. Tremaine. Granting this, then, you do not refuse your consent?"

Tremaine stopped short on the trail. "My consent?" he repeated. "I refuse all such responsibility. It is Barnard Lee's consent you should ask."

It was then, for the first time, that Brooke suspected Tremaine's sanity. His lack of balance would explain so much—the exile, the grave watchful care of Stephen, the atmosphere of unreality that pervaded the place. It might explain, too, Lee's participation in the business. He might be acting for some well-known family in a private and confidential way. All this crowded into Brooke's mind before he spoke. Then:

"You puzzle me, sir, but let me again remind you that my relations with Mr. Lee, while friendly, are purely businesslike when it comes to my private affairs."

At this Tremaine laughed. It was a laugh that Brooke remembered.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes, then Tremaine offered his hand as he said good-night. Brooke held the hand and said slowly, impressively:

"I want you to understand, sir, that in my love for Vallé is closely bound my respect for you and your brother."

"Thank you, Brooke." Tremaine was deadly serious. "And I hope you will impress all this upon Barnard Lee."

Brooke made his arrangements to return to New York at once. Much as he disliked to leave Vallé and the charm and ever-growing beauty of the woods, he felt now that he owed a very definite duty to those who must help him secure a happy future for Vallé. At the best he must look for shocked surprise, but every day added to the difficulty of readjustment.

He again pleaded for an immediate marriage—it would seem easier for Vallé to share in the readjustment from the beginning—but this Vallé herself rather proudly refused and Tremaine was aghast at the proposal. Through this all Stephen Tremaine moved almost sullenly, rarely referring to what had occurred and taking his violin into the woods for hours at a time. From some distant place the weird, sweet music sounded like a ghostly accompaniment of love, passion, and a sense of dismay at the thought of separation.

"It's so strange, Brian dear," Vallé said the night before his departure, "but do you know I seem to have gone through all this before—not seeing clearly, but I remember."

"And how did it end, little girl? I confess I need cheering when I think that I leave to-morrow."

"Well, that's the strangest part of the impression; beyond to-day, this moment, dear, I am in a fog."

Brooke drew her closer. "The fog will soon clear, darling. I'll be back in a month at the latest."

"A month. And this is September. A month from now there may be a light bit of snow on the red and yellow loveliness, the trails will be dimmed. Oh, Brian!" Vallé stood up and looked down into Brooke's uplifted and troubled eyes. "I would not hurt you for all the world, or interfere with your life, and I'm so terribly afraid that I am taking this way to get into a—a place that is not truly mine. I've been so unhappy always looking on, wanting something of my own, having a place of my own. Am I taking advantage, and when I am in a position to weigh and—and judge, will I regret, for your dear self?"

Brooke sprang up and held Vallé almost fiercely. "Another word of that kind," he said, his lips pressed to hers, "and I'll force you over the trails to Kemel Trench to-day! And see here, my dear, I want you always to remember this. I'm not taking you bound and gagged into bondage. I'm asking you to share my life because I love you as a man should love a woman. I am setting you free—not shackling you. I believe you love me or I would not urge my love upon you, but if we are mistaken, why, Vallé, it is not your pity

and gratitude that I would want but your faith in my understanding of the meaning of freedom. My dear, my dear—let us enter the big adventure like brave, free creatures, not master and slave!"

Vallé was trembling. Her face had a white radiance that startled Brooke.

"Have I been too rough?" he asked.

"Rough? Oh! Brian, you have seemed to light the way." Then: "Kemel Trench said some strange things to me to-day. He asked me questions. My answers, he said, must form my convictions. First, he asked me if I wanted you when you were away. You, not what you stood for. I said yes. I do, Brian. You are like a strong, sure sense of rightness. Then Kemel asked if I loved to have you touch me, hold me, kiss me."

"And what did you tell him?" This seemed to mean a tremendous thing to Brooke. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him—yes."

"That's enough to start on, my girl. Lord! I feel like a pioneer setting forth for a country no foot has ever trod before. I feel inspired, and my dear, my dear, I've been such an infernal dub until I saw and loved you."

It was almost with eagerness, now, that Brooke made his arrangements for going away. Early on the day of his departure he went to Trench. He found him covering up the hardy plants in his small garden.

Trench leaned upon his rake and smiled a welcome.

"I'm sorry it's good-bye, Brooke," he said. "You've put a meaning into things, made us all seem like men, not robots."

"Trench, that was rather fine—the things you said to Vallé about me—our relations to each other, you know."

Trench laughed rather shyly. "Oh! she was in a bit of a funk," he said. "I had to—to give her a dash of cold water." Then: "See here, Brooke, this is all a mighty interesting thing. Your coming—no real explanation given as to why and wherefore. I don't feel curious, but Lord! I'm interested. You're not being imposed upon, you know that, for Vallé Tremaine is rather a rare find in this day and generation. Somehow she's managed to learn certain, well, tricks of the game, but she has never had a chance to, what you may call, try her skill."

"I know, Trench, and I'm giving her the chance. She said something like that."

"Yes, I believe you are giving her a chance, Brooke, but it isn't all fair to you, old man. Another chance without obligations might have been fairer to you both."

"That is what I want to talk to you about, Trench. I see what you mean. If some woman could have taken Vallé and placed her, it would have been safer; given her a clearer perspective. Well, perhaps so, but I hap-

pen to be the only way into life—to use your jargon—and I'm all keyed up over it. I'm not in the least blinded. I want you to believe that. You'll see me prove it, so help me God!"

Trench absent-mindedly took off his hat and fixed his eyes on Brooke. "It's odd," he said, "how you happen to—to be this way, but I believe you *are* what you seem to be."

"I am, Trench, though I'm a bit muddled as to details about myself. What I want now is to have you arrange about Vallé's marriage to me. I'll be back as soon as I can arrange some things. Make it as cheerful and natural a marriage as you can."

"I'll see to that, Brooke. Telegraph before you come."

"Good-bye."

CHAPTER VI

CONSTANCE MOORE sat before the fire—a neat, small fire—in her perfectly equipped drawing room. She blinked and looked about as one does who has received a blithering blow on the head from an unexpected quarter and is slowly recovering. She glanced at each familiar object and mentally implored it to help her steady herself. A telegram lay upon her lap:

"WILL ARRIVE IN TIME FOR DINNER TUESDAY STOP AM ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED STOP NEED YOU MORE THAN EVER STOP BRIAN."

Stop! Stop! Stop! Something in Miss Moore seemed to shout the word. Stop! Stop! Stop!

The telegram had cost Brian no end of torment but it was the best, after many attempts, that he could achieve and he had duplicated it with slight variation for Lee and Ivas.

To Barnard Lee he had stated the hour at which he would be at the office, barring delay.

To Ivas he had added, "I NEED YOU MOST OF ALL STOP."

And while Constance Moore was slowly coming out of her coma, Lee in his office, grim-lipped and at bay, felt as the man in an old chess story felt who knew that some mighty ghostly shade behind his chair was directing a game he had believed himself master of and was giving his opponent power over him.

And Ivas in her bright little library was reading and rereading the last few words. "I NEED YOU MOST OF ALL STOP." Ivas's face was deadly quiet. She, like her father, took her blows in silence and, mentally, moved stealthily.

"Very well!" she muttered presently. "You need me! Stop!" Then and there she courageously made her decision to "stop." No one should force her to budge. She took her stand and meant to abide by it. There were no finalities in Ivas Lee's philosophy. Where something ended something new began and "hitched up," she often said, "without a jar if you had done your part and kept the machinery in order." She fervently hoped that she had kept her machinery in order. If Brian did not suspect her feeling for him all would be safe. "Stop!"

Ivas knew her little world fairly well. She had seen passions flare and burn themselves out—it was messy, but not fatal. "Stop!"

To be needed was the great thing. To be needed most of all, greater yet!

With that Ivas got up, put on her most becoming gown and arranged her best facial expression. "And now," she said quietly, "stop!"

Barnard Lee had crumpled the telegram and tossed it into the waste-paper basket. It had fulfilled its purpose. Lee did not "stop," however; his busy thoughts ran riot.

He had been guilty of a false move, no doubt as to that, but he was not defeated yet; not by a long way. Brooke was engaged, not married. Away from the influence into which he had been projected by Lee's false move, he would regain his balance and see, sanely, the advantages—— Here Lee paused. Brooke's value to him included a certain staunch individuality that must not be handled carelessly. And Brooke was necessary to Lee and very important. His suspicions must not be aroused. Apparently Tremaine had understood this—damn him! An engagement could be broken. Here Lee's mind, colored and tempered by suspicions and wrong conclusions, gave an ugly jerk. "If the young ass has become involved," he thought—"well, I may come in handy there." There was no "stop" in Lee's philosophy. With him, things must move.

There was positive satisfaction and relief on Lee's face now. "Need, indeed, for careful management."

He nodded his head. "Quite natural, too, with a fellow like Brooke. There's something to be said for a young fellow knowing the ropes."

And then Lee conjured up a possible image of Vallé Tremaine. "Quite understandable!" he added, with bitterness. "Figs from thistles—never!"

Miss Moore in her narrow, dainty drawing room gradually emerged into consciousness. Her reflections from that moment on were similar to Barnard Lee's, though of course virtuously diluted.

"Some nobody! Why will young men get themselves involved? I have tried to—to fit Brian for life—indirectly, of course, but—life! Engaged!" And then, quite with a sense of relief, Constance Moore thought of Barnard Lee. "Of course! In a case like this a man must deal with the matter. The girl——" But Miss Moore had no further interest in the girl. She aligned herself with the forces of decency and order. She'd call Barnard Lee up and place herself entirely in his hands.

But before she had time to do this Brian came rushing up the front steps, opened the door and was in the drawing room, his arms about his aunt before she could recover her poise.

"I just rushed in here first, Aunt Con. I must see Mr. Lee at once but I had to get your—what is it I must get? Oh! your blessing."

Miss Moore drew herself away and looked upon

her nephew as though he were a stranger and had offered her an insult. He was changed—a stranger indeed! He was brown and stronger than she had ever seen him and there was a look in his eyes—she often thought later of the impression she got at that moment—as if he had at last found out where he was, after being lost! Lost! when all his life he and she had trod a common path of perfect understanding! But now he had branched off and was glorying in it.

"He doesn't look depraved!" Miss Moore reflected. She could not speak yet.

"We'll talk it all over at dinner to-night, Aunt Con. I know you are knocked galley west. I'm sorry, but—well, when you see Vallé you will understand."

Then Miss Moore spoke. Somehow the pagan sound of the name Brian had used acted like an electric spark. "Vallé! Vallé!"

"Yes—Vallé Tremaine. Aunt Con, don't fail me now. You never have before. You're going to love this girl of mine. So much depends upon you. Come, dear, I must rush off, but I had to see you first."

Miss Moore rallied. After all, Barnard Lee would settle things, she must not mess them further; and a softer emotion tugged at her heart.

"My dear, my dear," she said, and there were tears in her eyes, genuine ones, "you—you have quite felled me."

"Aunt Con, it is all right, believe me. It's the big-

gest thing that has ever happened to me. You'll see that."

"My boy! you were so—unprepared——"

At this Brian Brooke gave a laugh that had the effect of drying Miss Moore's tears. "What do you mean," she asked vaguely, "by *that* laugh?"

"Nothing, everything, Aunt Con. Queer, isn't it, how little even the closest of us knows about the others?" Then, going off at a tangent: "Do you happen to know whether Keith Arnold is in town?"

"No—I hope he isn't."

Brooke bent again and kissed his aunt's forehead. "My traps will be along soon, Aunt Con, and I'll be here for dinner. Seven o'clock? And we'll talk far into the night."

He was gone, whistling as he went. Constance Moore felt as if he were going to a well-deserved thrashing, and while she hoped Barnard Lee would not lay the lash on too heavily, she steeled herself into a state of relief at the thought of chastisement. "I trust Ivas will not hear of it," she muttered. "If it can only be kept from her!" Then: "Could Brian have been mad enough to telegraph to her?"

Then it was that the doorbell rang and—yes, it was Ivas's voice in the hall. "In the drawing room? Alone? I'll go right in," she said to the maid.

Miss Moore looked up. "My dearest girl!" she

cried and stretched out her hands imploringly. "Brian has returned—been here, gone!"

Ivas sat down on a hassock by Miss Moore. Miss Moore had hassocks, of course. She had her books behind glass doors, too.

"You know, Ivas?"

"Yes. I have the announcement of Brian's engagement. It came like a bomb, didn't it? So entirely unlike Brian's methods. He has always seemed so—tidy and law-abiding." Ivas Lee laughed and patted Miss Moore's hands.

"My dear, *how* you take it!"

"Well, you see, dear Miss Moore, I'm not used to handling bombs, but after all, if we handle them carefully and keep them away from shock they are innocent enough, so I've heard." This had the effect of making Miss Moore feel that she was being spoken to in a language of which she knew but few of the words.

"Bomb—shock," she repeated. "Oh! I see. No, I don't—quite."

Ivas continued to pat the long, slender, delicate hands.

"Brian is engaged," Miss Moore went on, "and to whom?"

"A Vallé Tremaine, Miss Moore. A lovely name."

"Pagan, I call it."

"My father and this girl's father have known each

other for years, in a business way." Ivas was picking her words carefully, going on rather unsteadily—the current was dangerous, she realized that.

"I never heard of them!"

"Naturally, Miss Moore. Father is very secretive about his business."

Miss Moore flushed.

"Now Brian is engaged to marry this Miss Vallé Tremaine, Miss Moore. You must see what I mean. No matter what happens we—Father, you, and I—must see to it that—" here Ivas laughed a bit giddily —"see to it that this bomb doesn't do any damage! It's so awfully idiotic to smash things."

"I begin to see. Ivas, you are a wonderful girl."

"Thanks! Now come out with me to lunch and a matinée. Life must go on even if bombs have been wedged in."

"Yes, my dear, but—an engagement is not a marriage." Miss Moore was plucking up courage.

"I rather think it is the same thing with Brian, Miss Moore. He's always been so clear-headed. Father says that's his big asset. Come, dear."

And at that time Brooke was entering Lee's office. Lee had got himself in hand and was discounting that power behind him that had, for once, caused him to make a false move. He was master again.

"Well, my boy, you look fit!" They shook hands

across the desk, then Brooke sat down and a sort of panic seized him. The necessity for caution and good management was lost sight of in the confusion of emotions; blunt, amazing facts were hurled forth like brickbats from ambush, and he had thought himself so well in hand! It had been easy enough with Miss Moore.

"I've had a wonderful time, Mr. Lee, the biggest time of my life. It has left me a bit—bewildered, now that I am back. Up there it seemed the most natural thing in life—the most——"

"I see!" Lee did not see at all. He felt, for all his control, as if he had been struck blind. "You found Tremaine a good host. He would be. That is quite his line. And his brother, strange fellow! I suppose he played his—his various instruments?"

"Yes, wonderfully. He's a genius."

"Hardly that, but a fair musician."

Lee wanted to wipe his brow but refrained. This was worse than he had anticipated. Brooke's evident confusion was having its effect upon him.

"Well, Brian, let's begin."

"As I wrote you," Brooke made an effort to collect facts, "when Mr. Tremaine read your letter and—and tossed it on the fire, I naturally concluded that, whatever the business was, it was instantly agreed upon and settled. I considered it after that—well, let

us say unimportant, in a sense, and when Mr. Tremaine invited me to stay on I accepted."

"Yes."

"You've been there, Mr. Lee?"

"Years ago. Yes."

"It's a wonderful place—the men who own and run the Tavern know its value."

Lee scowled. He saw that Brooke was sparring for wind, and his own breathing was giving him trouble. After the first splurge things were flattening down.

"Some hunting, I suppose, Brian?"

"No—we did not hunt."

"What did you do to amuse yourself?"

A sudden recollection of those nights about the fire, the music, the abandon, made Brooke laugh a bit unsteadily. The laugh did more than anything else to throw Lee off his balance. He got up and walked to the window and back. By that time Brooke's face was preternaturally grave. He was pale and tense.

"Mr. Lee—there was, there is, Tremaine's daughter! I fell in love with her, as I wrote."

At a critical moment one does not act independently, nor with the meager knowledge at hand. All that has gone into the making of one, all the reactions of years, flood in and influence thoughts and deeds. Lee at that instant acted and spoke from years of hate and despair.

"My God! Brooke—you haven't been making an ass of yourself with Tremaine's daughter, have you? It isn't that?"

If Lee had struck him, Brooke could not have resented more fiercely. So that is what they thought of him! A fool to be rescued from a shameful escapade! That was why his aunt—— Brooke got up and, though he was unconscious of it, he had weighed everything: his ambition, his dependence upon Lee, his duty to him —everything was weighed and flung to the winds.

"Mr. Lee," he said, calmly enough now, "I am engaged to marry Vallé Tremaine."

"Marry!" Lee smiled. "Come now, my boy, be sensible. No matter what has happened, no matter what, I'm prepared to—to back you."

At this Brooke again flared out. "Please, Mr. Lee, let us get to a clear understanding at once. I'm deeply in love with Vallé Tremaine. She's——" Words failed him.

"And this is Tremaine's work!" Lee muttered the words, but they brought Brooke to a halt.

"You are mistaken," he said. "Mr. Tremaine even refused the responsibility of—of giving his consent. He left that to you."

As often one unconsciously deals an unexpected blow from ignorance, not intelligence, so Brooke's words proved: they left Lee all but breathless. "To me?" he said, and his quick mind flashed back and

forth over the long years. "Damn him! to me?" he repeated.

Brooke had time to get himself well in hand before Lee next spoke. He became convinced that, whatever held Tremaine in exile, whatever gave Lee power, it was something that affected both for different reasons, deeply—almost slavishly. Neither dared to make a definite move, and against such a background he and Vallé stood with their young, untested love.

"Brian, I beg your pardon." Lee spoke with an effort. He had come to one of his quick, unfaltering, decisive conclusions. He believed the worst, but he would act discreetly—advance cautiously. He got up and offered his hand. Brooke took it.

"This must never interfere with our business relations, Brooke."

"Thank you, sir. I am to return as soon as possible, to marry Miss Tremaine."

"You insist upon marrying her then?"

"Certainly!"

"Very well. And now there's some important business at hand."

Brooke went to his office and worked desperately all day. It was just when he began to think of going home that Ivas Lee entered the room. Instantly he was on guard. He wondered at what slant Ivas would attack him. His very soul seemed sensitive—it shrank from touch.

"Brian, dear, I'm glad you're back. I called for—for Father, but he has gone. I've had lunch with your aunt and we've been to a matinée."

Brooke's hand lifted toward the electric switch, but Ivas was beside him. She put her hand on his arm. "It's light enough. I love twilight. I wanted to be among the first," she said. Then: "Oh! I want you to be happy, dear. I am glad——" Ivas sat down upon the edge of the desk, her hand still clung to Brooke's arm.

"You are happy, Brian?"

"Happier than I can tell you, Ivas. When you see Vallé——"

"What a queer, dear name—say it again, Brian."

"Vallé." The word sounded like music as Brooke pronounced it.

"And she's lovely?"

"I think she is—she's like you, Ivas."

At this Ivas laughed an unsteady laugh. "Like me! Now, Brian, that proves everything—I mean about your state of mind."

Brooke looked up. "What is it, dear—not crying, are you?" Brooke bent over Ivas. He touched her cheeks; they were cold and wet. "How odd, my dear girl—tears?"

Ivas laughed again, a bit more steadily. "Well, dear boy, you see a—a sister with just one beloved

brother may be awfully happy over his happiness, but quite devastated at her own sense of loss."

"Loss? Ivas—that cannot be so. You will love Vallé."

"I—hope so."

"Ivas, you must!" Brooke, standing close again, let his hand touch Ivas's cheek. "Your friendship will mean everything, dear, you must see that."

"All right, Brian. I'm not going to run the risk of losing my brother. How's that?"

"Fine!" Brooke's sky seemed to clear. The clouds that had been scurrying across his busy day passed from sight. "Fine!" he repeated, and bent and kissed Ivas.

From that moment Brooke worked feverishly, making arrangements for his marriage. Lee never referred to the coming event, but he was generous in other ways. He suggested an increase of income and took some of Brooke's work off his hands for the time being.

Miss Moore was nonplused but she dared not act independently. She might get that shock and the bomb into action. Ivas's words, when she recalled them, made her feel hysterical. It looked as if Brian really were going to carry the tragic thing through and Miss Moore still had enough affection and pride left to make an explosion a thing to be averted.

Day by day, little by little, Ivas was building a

vastly interesting background against which Brian could set his stage, if he insisted upon carrying out his Quixotic plans. It was Barnard Lee who had termed them that, when he called upon Miss Moore to offer his congratulations.

Congratulations, indeed! Another of Ivas's tricks!

To Brooke, eager, distracted, and worked to the limit, Ivas appeared as the one glorious reality wrenched from his former life. "She is marvelous," he thought, and he clung to her, imploring her help in making plans for Vallé.

"Take her to your aunt's just at first, Brian. Give them a chance."

"A chance? Oh! I see."

"There's the upper floor of the house, dear, your room and the two others. Miss Moore will adore making them beautiful—she is a natural decorator."

"You are a trump, Ivas, but don't girls like to do their own houses?"

"This is not Vallé's house, Brian dear, it is her stepping stone."

"I see. Ivas, Vallé and I owe you a lot."

"You'll owe me a lot more as time goes on."

To that there seemed no answer.

And then from out of space, as was his way, Keith Arnold appeared one day in Brooke's office, apparently knowing all the news.

"Where in thunder have you been, old man?"

Brooke rushed at Arnold. He had never been so glad to see him before.

"New Mexico"—this at random. Any distant spot on earth would do.

"You know, Keith, about me?"

"Of course. I've been spending a dutiful evening with my aunt. She's like a wireless station, Brian, all lines lead to her."

"I'm leaving to-morrow, Keith. I'll bring my wife back shortly."

"Need a best man?"

"No—I'll have to do!" Then: "Keith, at critical moments the real thing—people, friends, you understand—they count!"

"You bet. That's why I got up early and butted in. And see here, Brian, don't think ever that you've got to do any explaining. I'm interested as the devil but not snoopy. Catch on?"

"She's lovely, Keith. I thought I was girl-proof until I saw her. I've been a clam and ambitious and all that, but she's—well, don't roar, but she's opened Paradise to me."

Arnold looked preternaturally serious. "She's a quick worker," he ventured.

"She would be—with me. I was rather dry stuff, or getting to be."

"That's right. I often warned you. You'll blaze all right."

"As soon as I get back, Keith, I want you to see her."

"I'll make that my business. I've canceled reservations for—for Africa."

"Great, Arnold, simply great!"

"And I'm going to see if your aunt wants any help in getting up a family dinner party," Arnold rushed on.

"Keith, I'll never forget this."

"I bet you won't be *let!* And now, old man, here's a little gift for Vallé—a great name that, sounds like music."

Brian looked at the box Arnold was holding out, opened.

"You won't object?" Arnold asked.

Brooke looked at the string of exquisite pearls—small, perfectly matched—and was, for a moment, overcome. "Keith, this is the first gift any one of my people has thought to offer. While I live I'll remember this."

"That's all right. I like to secure a seat in advance, old man. I make a wager, now, that Vallée and I are going to be understanding pals. Good-bye—and good luck!"

CHAPTER VII

HEDGED IN seemed dull enough after Brooke's departure. Even his daily letters could not alter, to any great degree, the atmosphere of expected change and uncertainty. Like the creatures of the woods, the lonely men had to prepare for winter. John and Stephen worked incessantly—John doing the harder tasks, Stephen alert and watchful when he could efficiently serve.

Kemel Trench came often. He was a little anxious. He was wondering what effect the marriage and departure of Vallé would have upon the two men for whom he cared deeply but whom he understood so little. "Working in the dark," he often thought, "is rather crude, unless you realize that some sort of higher intelligence is guiding you." Trench did believe that. At times his religion flamed warm and radiant in his lonely life.

Vallé nervously flitted from one task to another. She canned and preserved every fruit and vegetable she could gather into the quiet, sunny kitchen. She

sang a good deal to keep her spirits up: to help in raising the spirits of others. But through it all a hurting sense of relief at the prospect of her going pervaded. They were all glad of her going. She felt it like an echo. John Tremaine was openly pleased, and for the first time in their common life permitted Vallé to see that he cared for her. It was as if he now dared to take a personal interest in her. "And it makes me desperately sad," the girl thought, "it doesn't cost him anything now. He's so glad to be rid of me."

Stephen's attitude was different. At times it seemed almost as if he were on the verge of saying something vital; something defiant and which if once spoken would alter the future. He followed Vallé about, his deep, sad eyes burning feverishly. "You are happy, Vallé?" he would ask.

"Now, Uncle Steve, you've asked me that a hundred times. Of course I am as happy as a girl can be whose nearest relatives act as you and Father do."

"What do you mean by that, Vallé?"

"I've always felt, Uncle Steve—I do not mean to be hateful, but I've always felt that you and Father were, in a way, trying to push me off a raft I was clutching at, and now that you have succeeded, Father seems relieved. He knows I'll swim all right—anyway, keep my head up. You haven't quite so much faith and you're dear enough not to want to see me drowned."

"For God's sake, Vallé, don't talk like that."

"Oh! it is fun, Steve dear. I won't go under. My capacity for keeping my head up is what frightens me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm so terribly afraid, Steve dear, that people may think I grabbed anything that promised safety."

"And if they do, Vallé, what then?" Stephen, hunched by the fire on his low stool, looked across at Vallé like a worried and half-sick gnome.

"Why, I'll have to convince them to the contrary. When Brian is with me I am braver."

"Vallé, I've sometimes thought that out—out in the world you and I with our music might have righted things a bit." Was poor Stephen thinking even yet of a safer way out?

"We may yet, Steve dear. I have that in mind."

But this seemed to frighten Stephen Tremaine. "See here, Vallé—I'm going to confide something to you."

"Need you, Steve?"

"Yes. The kindest thing you and Brooke can do, once you're married, is to leave us—John and me—alone."

"Why, Uncle Steve!"

"I know what I'm talking about. If you'll take my advice you may be averting——"

"Why, Steve, what do you mean?"

"Nothing!" Tremaine kicked a log. "Nothing—and everything."

Just then Trench came in and the subject was never brought up again, but Vallé did not forget it. Once only did Stephen Tremaine edge close to the matter. He said then:

"Do not judge your father's affection or mine, Vallé, by our lack——"

"I won't, dear, but by your kindness. Kindness, Uncle Steve, and sacrifice, too. I feel there has been much sacrifice."

"No—not that, Vallé."

"Just that. And now listen to me. Whatever it is, it is Father that matters, and I am with you, Uncle Steve, and so is Brian. You must judge us by that." And then Vallé bent and kissed the sad, wan face.

Once, and once only, did Stephen have a heart-to-heart talk about Vallé's future with his brother. He was sitting with John in the huge living room. Vallé had gone for the mail and night was drawing close. A cold wind was lashing the tree branches against the uncurtained windows. Suddenly he said:

"I wish you'd consent to have curtains at those windows, John. I feel hunted."

"I never felt less so, Steve. Can you not see things have come to grips? Either Barnard Lee will strike or he'll decide not to strike. He knows where to find us. Curtains would not secure us from him. Life

sentences are more in Lee's line than capital punishment. I have hopes. I will refuse further support from Lee, however."

"And then what?" Stephen breathed hard.

"We must get along upon what you have saved, Steve, and my connection with the men at the camps."

"John!"

"It's quite safe, Steve, have no fear. My God! but I'm thankful that Vallé has a chance, but I find it in my heart to pity Lee."

"You've burned your bridges, John."

"No—I think I've mended them, old man. I think they are strong enough to bear our weight now—yours and mine. Vallé was the last ounce that would have broken them down."

"John, I'm afraid!"

"You need not be, Steve. I haven't felt so secure in years. I'm rather sure of this young Brooke. Vallé's a girl to make a man like him prove his mettle. He's young; modern. I think the new philosophy of life is in his blood—quality of mercy, you know. Injustice, to such as I believe him to be, would arouse the best in him, not the worst. If Lee shows his hand I'm inclined to think Brooke would push it aside. I think Lee knows this.

"There's something to be said for the religion of Trench. God moving in a mysterious way, and all that. At times I feel that Lee is more afraid of me

now than I am of him. He's just been going around on his wheel while I, flung off into space, have at least had opportunity to get rather a wider view.

"And see here, Steve. I've been thinking that, after all, you and I might try the other side of the ocean. If the worst came to the worst we could find a warmer climate than this to starve to death in. Steve, do you believe in Fate?"

"My God, John, I don't know."

"I often think we overestimate it."

"There's just one thing I'm determined upon. Once Vallé is safely launched—safely, I say, Steve—I'm going to see that neither you nor I complicate her future. Lee shall not get back at me through her. I cannot quite understand his present apparent indifference, but if he is getting ready to hit out you and I are going to be out of his range and Brooke can defend Vallé.

"Paris, Steve, Paris! I haven't thought of it in years—and that little town in Italy that you and I went to for a summer vacation, the summer before——"

"Don't, John. For the Lord's sake, don't."

"All right, old man, but remember this: You and I are not going to clog Vallé's path. We owe it to her mother."

The mention of Vallé's mother had an effect upon both men that would be difficult to understand. Once

spoken, a silence followed. Stephen sidled off to the kitchen and John Tremaine, like a man who had inadvertently let loose a dangerous enemy, sat brooding by the fire, a darker and darker frown upon his face.

It was heavy work, this of arranging for Vallé's marriage. Trench insisted that it should have, at least, the semblance of a happy event; and Vallé, herself confused, at times a little amused, endeavored to do her part.

From some unsuspected quarter Stephen had produced a traveling case of clothing—for years he had hidden the case under the eaves in the air chamber of the roof. They were all that he had saved from one of the hardest experiences of his life. A couple of dresses, a few articles of fine underwear, delicate trifles once belonging to Vallé's mother. During all the years he had secreted the things, not daring to mention them to John Tremaine, but now, Stephen argued, they belonged to Vallé, and perhaps the gowns would look a bit more right than the strange, draped garments that Vallé designed out of long pieces of goods. Stephen, artistic to his finger tips, admired Vallé's attempts at gowns, but he knew they were not right.

John took no part in the preparations. This hurt Vallé cruelly and she wished that she might steal away with Brooke and "have the thing over." But when she

saw the contents of the old suitcase that Stephen produced she was deeply moved and excited.

"But Steve," she cried, forgetting for a moment her resolve never to force her way into the past, "these are lovely. Where on earth did you get them? Where have you kept them, and why?"

Stephen leaned against the rough stones of the chimney; they were alone in the living room—decorated now by Kemel Trench with ground pine and red berries. "They were your mother's. They've been up in the loft ever since——" A slow intaking breath, then, "You better keep them out of sight, but they are yours. Take them with you. There's a box ——" He looked cautiously around while Vallé searched in the case.

"Yes, here it is! Oh, Steve, a little wedding ring and three lovely diamond rings. Oh, Steve!" It was to the little wedding ring Vallé clung. "My mother's!" she said softly, and kissed the narrow hoop. "I have wondered, I have not dared to hope——"

Stephen seemed to understand. He lifted his troubled eyes; a dumb pity filled them. "She—good God, Vallé, you didn't think——?" he spoke hoarsely.

Vallé nodded. "But it wouldn't have mattered much," she said, again kissing the little ring.

"You, of all the world, can be sure of one thing." Stephen merely whispered the words. "She was worthy

of your love and—and respect. Just hold to that, always."

"Thank you, Steve." Then Vallé took out the gowns and held them at arm's length. The red fire glow played over them.

"Beautiful!" The girl trembled with delight. "This one is silver mesh, and designed by an artist—a design that will never seem too old. It's like a robe—a royal robe. And my mother wore it. See, Steve, there's a little stain where she must have dropped something. As it is I will wear it some day. Why, Steve, it is a—a proof of real quality." Vallé laughed and tenderly folded the shimmering gown. "And this"—she looked at the other garment—"a little traveling suit. It looks tired, Steve, a bit worn and frayed. Nothing can be done with this except to keep it as a sacred thing."

Stephen did not speak. He was listening for footsteps. John must know nothing of this.

"And soft little underthings!" Vallé was murmuring. "They've been worn and mended daintily. Oh, Steve, you have given me a kingdom! These, too, shall lie with the little tired dress that traveled so far."

"You must hide them," Steve ordered.

"All right, dear, I will. But the ring, Steve, my mother's wedding ring. I must be married with that. No one, I promise you, shall know, but Brian and me."

It was the day after this that Kemel Trench arrived on a low rough cart, attended by a couple of loggers.

"The wedding guests," he explained. "The only two I could depend upon to keep up a decent appearance. Pay-day struck them on a hungry stomach this time and I was off my beat." Trench laughed. Then:

"Here's a telegram for Vallé, and by the way, Tremaine, my roof fell in last night. Until it's mended, can you put me up? Any old knock-down will do."

"You're more than welcome, Trench. What have you got there?" Tremaine asked, for Trench was pulling something from the cart.

"Just things—I didn't want to have ruined," Trench said.

John Tremaine saw what they were. They were like the sacred ark of ancient times to Trench—the last articles his wife had touched, his visible link with her.

Trench had a purpose in coming to Hedged In. His religion and philosophy were grounded upon preparedness. After Vallé went, Trench argued to himself, whatever lay buried would stalk. Trench did not know what it was and he did not care, but it would test the Tremaine mettle, and at such times a friend might come in handy. "And a spiritual adviser," he added, and laughed to himself.

CHAPTER VIII

THE telegram was from Brooke. Vallé read it and raised her shining eyes to the three men. "Brian is on his way. We are to be married at once," she said.

"He's coming alone?" Tremaine asked, and Stephen breathed hard.

"Alone, yes."

This had an amazing effect upon Tremaine. He felt suddenly as if all the irons that had bound him were struck away. What he had feared he hardly knew, but if Brooke were alone things seemed safer.

"See here, Trench," Tremaine said, going over to the man by the fireside, "it's great luck your happening in as you have. I hope you've brought that God of yours along with you. It looks to me as if He had been resurrected after all these years."

"Father!" Vallé cried, seeing Trench's stern face.

But Trench merely replied: "He's been resurrected for ages. It's our—our blindness that's at fault, Tremaine." Trench spoke seriously and with authority.

It was two days later that Brooke arrived at evening. No one had heard him, a light snow muffled all

sound. He stood by the uncurtained window and looked in. Then it was that he felt anew the power that Vallé held over him.

The four inside were sitting at the table, their faces bent over the food before them. The firelight rested upon Vallé, it seemed to pick her out and glorify her. Brooke had recently been doing silent and strenuous battle for her, seeking to prepare a place for her back there where he belonged, but one glimpse of her made him almost laugh aloud. She would carry success with her, nothing mattered! And with that he pounded on the door.

Three days later Kemel Trench married them. Stephen, standing in the shadow, played the wedding march; the dogs lay cluttered about the hearth; John Tremaine, Brooke, and Vallé stood before Trench. The service was home-made, crude, but beautiful in a way.

"The only thing I've clung to from the past," Trench had once confided to Tremaine, "is my right to marry people, christen, and bury them."

There was a little feast after the ceremony— "the proper look of things," Tremaine had said to Stephen, "even if there is no reality inside."

To Vallé he said: "My dear, I've done the best I could."

"I know, Father. I thank you."

"It sounds brutal, but you'll be doing us all the greatest kindness by——"

"I understand. You are free of me at last, Father. I realize that."

Tremaine winced. "You are—I hope, my dear girl—free of us," he said.

"I wish, Father—" Vallé put out her hands and lifted them to Tremaine's shoulders—"I wish you'd let me get a little closer to you now, dear," she faltered. "All my life I've been dreaming—groping. Couldn't you trust me, now?"

Tremaine took the hands from his shoulders, held them and said quietly, "For your sake—no, Vallé. I am grateful that my silence has been made possible. You will wake up to reality at last and in a place of your own, uncluttered by débris. The rest does not matter."

"And you think this wise—just?" She had never gone so far before.

"It is quite out of my power to be wise or just, Vallé. What I have done for you I was forced to do. The greatest thing I can now do for you is to let you go."

Vallé bent and kissed the hands that held hers. "Was anything ever so unreal, so strange?" she said. Then: "I shall return sometime, Father. Just remember that."

But Tremaine, seeing Brooke enter the room,

handed Vallé, with rather a grand gesture, to him. "It's a bit like walking off the plank, my dear boy," he said with a gracious smile, "but the sea is calm and I rather imagine you and Vallé are good swimmers."

Vallé had never seen her father in so puzzling a mood, and in that mood she and Brooke left him.

After they were gone and Trench was in bed, Stephen and John sat by the fire that was all but dead on the hearth.

"Tired, Steve?"

"Not more than usual."

"Why don't you speak out, old man? We might as well make a night of it."

Stephen shifted his position. In the dim room the men looked like uneasy ghosts.

"I sent a letter to Lee to-day, Steve. I refused any further connection with him, and after a bit I'll be ready to go across seas with you."

"After a bit, John? Then you, too, fear?"

"For Vallé? Very little. She's entrenched, Steve. There's something in that, you know. Brooke has a stiff, fighting chin."

"I think Lee has something up his sleeve, John, and Vallé may have to pay."

"That was bound to happen in any case. She's reenforced as it is. Brooke is deeply in love with her. There will be questions and probings, of course, but

as things are, the danger is lessened. That chin of Brooke's!" Tremaine gave a nervous laugh. Then:

"I don't know, Steve, I don't know. It's all been a damned blind alley. In a way it is all very interesting. I'm more alive than I've been in years. The load's shifted to Lee's shoulders."

At this Stephen sighed and said: "There's nothing to do but wait. We cannot leave until spring, anyway."

"And it's early autumn down there where Vallé's gone, early autumn, and here——"

"Winter has set in—winter, and spring too far off to count on." Stephen got up. "Good-night," he said wearily, "good-night."

Brooke waited nearly a week before he let anyone know that he and Vallé were in New York. He had several reasons for doing this—some of them fantastic but delightful. It was pure romance, this of being hidden away in the great city alone with Vallé. Brooke understood, now, Keith Arnold's joy in dropping out of sight. Then, too, he wanted Vallé to buy beautiful clothes. Fearing that he might be seen and recognized, he sent her with the hotel shopper every morning, and then shared her delight, later, in the lovely things that came to the hotel wrapped so alluringly in delicate paper.

Their own ventures into the city life were made by night. Brooke selected the places he felt, at least

partially, safe in going to; the slight risk added to the thrill. It was marvelous the way Vallé slipped into the fashions and ways of her new life; Brooke could never quite understand it. Not a hint of gaucherie clung to her.

"I told you, Brian dear," she explained, "I was always a good observer. Lonely, hungry people are. The joy to me is to find that I can play the game now that I have the chance. It's a bit like Cinderella's delight in finding that the slipper did not pinch, after the life she had led."

"What an excitement you are, Vallé." Brooke, leaning back in a lounging chair, regarded the girl pacing gracefully the hotel room before the long mirrors.

"Haven't you seen plenty more like me, Brian? Don't tell me that I am still odd?"

"You'll always be different, sweetheart. I hardly know how to say it. I'm getting disgustingly sentimental, but you seem the right thing—perfected—the actual existence of things hoped for."

"I'm going to show you something, Brian. It's been a secret." Vallé went to an inner room and from her trunk brought her mother's silver gown. She shook out the glistening mesh before Brooke's astonished eyes. "My mother's!" she said simply. "The little ring you put upon my finger—what luck that you forgot a wedding ring, Brian—well, the ring I supplied was

my mother's. These were hers, and these." Vallé held out the jewelry.

Brooke took the glittering rings in his hand. "These are exquisite," he said.

"Steve gave them to me—they are secrets."

"That's all right, Vallé."

"I know, dear, but I cannot tell you what it meant to me—the little wedding ring. Just a tiny proof! And this lovely gown, Brian. You cannot be expected to understand, but, my dear, I am awfully pleased to know that I am not a—a beggar maid to my—my king! Beggar maids have no silver gowns."

"My darling!" Brooke rushed to her.

"Oh! I understand, Brian dear. You'd be the best and most understanding king that ever was, but no self-respecting woman wants, or chooses, to be—a beggar maid. That silver gown proclaims that I come from a past that took silver gowns for granted. Not even the little spot mattered. There would be other silver gowns! I'm proud of the spot!

"Brian, I'm going to wear my mother's gown and her rings the day we go to your people, and the pearls of your Keith Arnold, of course. After that all that you give me will have its place. I will be understood, dear boy, as you would never make them understand, if I appear with a background of old silver and gold. I will look old-fashioned and odd, but the robe fits. I will wear it."

Brooke was puzzled but his happiness overcame the confusion in his mind. Whether anyone understood or not, life held for him now all that he had ever dumbly, fumblingly asked of life, but, and this grew amazingly amusing to Brooke during the next few days, that idea of Vallé's about the king and the beggar maid took on absurd proportions. Silver-sheen gowns in one's blood did have some value to some people, but it would arouse a new set of questions. Being a king was no happy prospect to Brooke and he knew his people well enough to know that Vallé, well reënforced by familiar trappings, could plead for herself better than all his love (puppy passion, some might call it) could do for her. Still, there would be those new questions he had not prepared for. That silver gown introduced a new issue.

Brooke and Vallé took long auto rides into the lovely country surrounding New York. The soft autumn tints were just beginning to show and the cultivated beauty pleased Vallé greatly.

"It's like England," she said. "I see it all with understanding eyes and there is no fog."

At night they often went to high buildings and watched the magic city rise supremely from the sordid city of the day.

"Beautiful! Beautiful!" Vallé would murmur, clinging to Brooke's arm. "It does not seem real. It's a bit like a splendid, divine lily coming up out of slime and

wrong things. I wonder, Brian dear, if I shall ever really see *your* city here? You see, my city seems nothing but love and light."

Brooke was often to think of that during the days when his own busy, hum-drum life caught and held him captive. Barnard Lee, with his intense application to work and satisfying results, would command much of Brooke's time and energy, but there would be flashes during the most strenuous hours when Brooke would wonder where Vallé was in her search for a city within a city, that she could clutch and call her own while he was grilling away making everything possible for her.

At last the strange, bewitched honeymoon detachment ended. Brooke telephoned to Constance Moore.

"Vallé and I are in the city," he said, smiling over the mouthpiece at Vallé.

"Can you come to—to dinner to-night?" Miss Moore's voice was vibrant. "I have the Lees and—and Keith Arnold. They are holding themselves ready."

"Yes, Aunt Con."

"And, my boy—you *will* come here, come here, won't you? I have the upper floor beautifully ready."

Vallé nodded gaily. "Say yes, thank you!" she whispered.

Brian said, "Yes, thank you, Aunt Con. We'll move in——"

"To-morrow," suggested Vallé.

"To-morrow, Aunt Con."

Constance Moore moved away from her telephone in a fluttering state of mind. With Ivas Lee's help and constant reminders she was, to some extent, prepared and was ready to play her part on a stage scientifically set. Ivas was a good manager—she never overdid and she relied upon modern and futuristic methods.

"People are apt to nibble where they refuse to be overfed," she insisted. "This is all very sudden, of course, Aunt Con, but that has its advantages. Father sent Brian on an important business trip. Thank heaven! Canada is vast enough and unknown enough to be a most desirable background. Father is safe enough. Anyone he vouches for——"

"But will he vouch?" Miss Moore asked.

"It looks somehow as if he would, indirectly anyway. He doesn't sputter any more, that's something." Ivas was rather tense.

"And Vallé—do say her name less rigidly, Miss Moore. It's Vallé—not Valley."

"Oh, my dear! Such a name!"

"I rather like it. It either springs from imagination or inheritance."

"She may be a—a gawky creature," Miss Moore interjected, "and with that name she'll be a—a—laughing joke."

"She's been educated in England, Miss Moore. That's bound to count. England does pretty good jobs with raw material. Anyway, I think you and I, with Father a silent partner and Keith Arnold an ardent plunger, have done all we can. Now, walk in Mr. and Mrs. Brian Brooke, and see to it, Miss Moore, that you do not forget your lines."

"Oh! Ivas my dear, dear child, does this mean nothing to you?"

Ivas paused and looked seriously at the older woman before she said slowly: "It means so much, so damnably much, that no one is going to suspect it if I can help it, and it's got to be a go!"

It was a wonderful night—that night when Vallé entered her husband's home. The long, narrow windows of the drawing room were set wide to the soft, warm night, the autumn chill was lacking. The tall, narrow house was lighted from top to bottom; the tall, narrow hostess, in perfect attire, sat by the hearth —the empty, clean hearth; rarely did a fire clutter that fireplace.

Ivas, in a bewildering gown of blue, moved about restlessly. Her father's grim calm was not reassuring; it did not make for much help; but Keith Arnold in faultless garb was at his best. He hadn't got so much thrill out of his detested New York life in many a day. He was alive to impressions and tingling with excitement.

The quiet, well-trained little maid suddenly, for Brian had let himself and Vallé in with his latch key and Miss Moore had not counted on that, announced nervously:

"Mr. Brian, ma'am, and Mrs. Brian." The girl had been years in the family; the simple words had real dignity in them for all the startled voice.

Miss Moore got up and moved forward as if propelled by a force quite outside herself—she wondered, afterward, if Ivas had pushed her. The others stood still, quite still.

And that sweet, rare-looking girl in a marvelous, ageless gown of silver was Brian's wife! She looked as if she had stepped from an old portrait.

"Well—of all——" Keith Arnold could think no further.

"Yes," Ivas whispered meaninglessly, "yes." And she went quickly across the room.

Barnard Lee felt and acted as if he had had a stroke. Fortunately no one noticed him for a brief space. Miss Moore, Ivas, and Arnold were playing their parts rather too vehemently, and there Lee stood transfixed! Like a ghost swinging lightly, rather shockingly, over the waste of hate-filled years, he saw —not Brian Brooke's wife, but another woman before him, in a silver gown. The gown, the flash of diamonds—not all diamonds flashed like those—then Lee rallied.

"Vallé, my dear, this is Mr. Lee." Brooke spoke proudly.

Lee had not moved; they had come to him. And then Lee did, mechanically, a thing that years ago he had done to another woman. He bent and kissed Vallé Brooke's hand. The hand upon which shone diamonds —diamonds that did not seem to glitter as ordinary diamonds did.

Never had Keith Arnold proved himself a more welcome guest than he did that night. By the sheer determination to reduce to normal what he felt to be a wretched state of affairs, he rallied all his resources. He had never been more delightful, more recklessly gay, more daringly impudent. Through her sense of shock Miss Moore blessed him, though she could never quite approve of him! Ivas came to his assistance gallantly. Mr. Lee, slowly emerging from his bewildered state, regarded him as he might a reviving draught that established sanity.

It was over at last. The tall, narrow house was silent and dark. In their hotel rooms Vallé and Brian, somewhat exhausted, reviewed the evening.

"My dear child, you bowled them over."

"I'm afraid I did."

"I do not know what they expected, Vallé——" Brooke paused.

"Not the silver gown, Brian, dear. It was the gown that did the trick. I told you it would. Such gowns are

not conceived and brought to life in what Hedged In stands for."

"It was you, my sweet. You looked divine."

"I frightened Mr. Lee."

"I saw that you took him by surprise. I nearly dropped when he kissed your hand. He isn't a hand-kissing type."

"He's going to hate me, Brian."

"Nonsense. He'll probably end in kissing your hand every time he sees you."

"No—and he'll hate me a little more because he kissed my hand to-night."

"Vallé, you are tired."

"Dreadfully tired." Then: "But it's going to be all right, Brian. It's queer, but I feel inside at last. All the training I've had—seeing others happy and fixed, envying them and all that—makes me feel secure. You will not have to worry, dear boy. You are going to go back to the dear familiar ways and I'm going to get on beautifully, and whenever I feel a qualm I'm going to put on my silver gown. My mother's wedding gift to me. . . . Brian!"

"Yes, dear heart."

"I hope Ivas will care for me. Queer! but there *is* something about her—like me."

"You see that, Vallé? I hadn't thought the likeness was to you."

"Yes."

"Ivas will like you. She's great stuff—Ivas!"

"Your aunt! Oh, Brian, how did you happen to be you with your aunt at the wheel?"

"Come now, my girl. That isn't fair, quite. Some day you'll understand Aunt Con."

"Forgive me, Brian. At least she *did* manage to let you be—you."

"Thanks. Get undressed, Vallé, and into bed, your eyes look like stars."

"Brian," from the room beyond, "you like Keith Arnold very much?"

"He's my best friend."

"He's quite the most unmanageable man I ever met. I haven't met many, to be sure. I was thinking this evening that it really is very shocking how *few* men I have met. Young men."

"Unmanageable? What an odd word to use about old Keith, Vallé." Nothing else of the confidence touched Brian.

"Well, he is. Has anything ever really got the best of him, Brian?"

"I don't know that anything ever tried to, or had any reason to try to get the best of him. Come now, Vallé, turn in."

"Brian!"

"Yes, dear."

"I've turned in. What are you doing?"

"Looking over a paper Mr. Lee gave me to-night. Business."

"Oh!" sleepily. "I'll wager Keith Arnold isn't muddling his head with business"—a light laugh. "He was awfully funny to-night, Brian, and tremendously successful. He actually floated our dinner party single-handed. I'll make another wager. I wager he's walking the streets trying to—to calm down."

"Good-night, Vallé." Brooke was grinning over the paper Lee had asked him to look at before he came to the office in the morning.

"Good-night, Brian."

Brooke put the paper aside wearily. For the first time in his life the thought of returning to business irritated him.

CHAPTER IX

Brian Brooke, however, slipped back into his busy life with all the ease and grace of a well-directed plane under the control of intelligence. There was no jar, no sense of a "drop."

The readjustment was not so easy for Vallé, though a sense of excitement gave interest to every detail of her days. Everything was so different and yet so exactly what in dreams, somewhere long ago, she had imagined it. The sense of importance, the surprise of the slow realization that she meant so much to others, in one way or another gave zest to everything. She, who had lived her earlier life apart among strangers who were training her to accept a lonely, self-supporting life; who later had had the brief experience of detachment in her father's home; amid the mystery and unreality of the silent place—to Vallé, now, the stir of a new and varied existence of which she was a vital and important part was romance of the highest order. It never palled. Miss Moore amused her. She grew to understand that the older woman, with her narrow but clear range of vision, was having a more

difficult problem to solve where Vallé was concerned than Vallé herself was having.

Miss Moore was Brian's aunt, a woman who had given up her life and shared her little fortune with him. There was much to admire about Miss Moore and Brian saw to it that Vallé should be informed as to this.

"As she reconstructed this old house," he once said, "she has constructed her life. She is a good business woman; she's a good woman."

"I am sure she is, dear," Vallé assented, but thought: "I wish she were not so like her house architecturally—tall and too narrow. I rub up against the side walls all the time." And fleeting visions of the broad, high spaces of the Hedged In living room made Vallé smile rather sadly. After all, though, there was real comfort in finding something to touch.

Miss Moore had, indeed, a problem where Vallé was concerned. She had, in accepting Ivas Lee's attitude toward Brian's marriage, pictured Vallé as something crude and plastic; something to be molded with more or less difficulty, but molded into shape! And here she was with her middle-aged life work crumbling about her feet.

Vallé was charming to Miss Moore, but that was not running true to the conceived plan. She should have been grateful or rebellious—a creature to encourage or to drag into line.

The rooms on the top floor of the tall house suddenly took on a new atmosphere, a something quite outside Miss Moore's conception of rooms. Miss Moore could not understand how this could be with so little actual change. The rooms were no longer Miss Moore's interpretation of what rooms should be—they were too casual, the air rushed through them too violently. Perhaps that was it, the air circulated too freely. Too many windows open. Then, too, Vallé had plans and interests of her own. She did not sit patiently waiting for Miss Moore's guiding and skillful hand upon her wheel—she was always eager to accept invitations or agree to suggestions unless she were "otherwise engaged."

"Otherwise engaged." Miss Moore felt as if she had been asked to step aside. "Just a little way, please." That was it, "just a little aside, please." The gentle dignity, the sweet smile did not entirely conceal the command. Brian was right. Vallé's smile was wonderful, but it disturbed as well as charmed.

"But what—what can you possibly have to do?" Miss Moore mistakenly asked once. "You are so new to all this."

"That's just it," Vallé beamed. "I think everyone should blaze his own trail, don't you? in a new and wonderful place."

Miss Moore had not the faintest idea of blazed trails. Her strong point was taking over other people's

trails and reconstructing them, before following on.

"I do not follow you, my dear," she floundered.

"Don't try, dear Miss Moore."

"Is it never to be Aunt Constance?" gulped Miss Moore.

"Certainly, Aunt Constance." Then: "I want to know your friends and they are most kind, but if I had too much of all these eating affairs I'd be quite ill and soggy. Why is it that we must all eat when we get together—luncheons and teas and long, long dinners? You see, Aunt Constance, when I was at school in England, and that was nearly all my life, the rule was to eat as little of the health-sustaining food as possible. It made good strong lean bodies of small American girls."

"But you are Canadian."

"By adoption—yes."

Miss Moore rolled that under her tongue for future cuddling.

"And this city," Vallé was running on, "is quite, quite the most marvelous place. London was always in fog when I saw it. London was not encouraged at Beech Grove—my old school. New York is never in a fog. I do not believe there could be a fog that would blur it. Such color and high places! I asked a man to take me up in a lift the other day to the top of a building I couldn't see from the street without falling backward. He did—it was divine up there!"

"Were you alone?" gasped Miss Moore.

"No, there was a little circle of us. We touched elbows. It made me think of something Kemel Trench said once."

"Kemel Trench?"

"A dear friend up in Canada. A minister who has shaken the churches."

"Shaken what?" Miss Moore was a good Episcopalian by inheritance and supposed conviction.

"Churches," Vallé explained. "The war made him see that he had to if he were honest—and Kemel Trench is honest to the core. What he said that I remembered when I stood on that balcony way up in the clouds was this: 'All of us, every single human creature, is part of a circle and draws his strength and inspiration from a deep and common Power in the center. Each from his angle gets an answer to his need. If we push anyone aside, it makes trouble but it never can *break* the circle of humans.' That's what I remembered on the balcony and I felt awfully friendly to the two next to me."

"My dear, my dear, have you told Brian about this?" Miss Moore felt dizzy.

"Yes. He loved it. Brian was very much impressed by Kemel Trench. He said that if Kemel's religion was given a chance we might look for a new heaven and new earth."

Miss Moore could endure no more. Concentrated

food always had a bad effect upon her digestion. "And you will not come to Mrs. Marshall's tea with me?" she asked, rising.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Constance, but I cannot." No further explanation. Then: "But tell Mrs. Marshall I'll play the violin for her and sing at her dinner party, if she wants me to."

Ivas Lee was, as much so as Miss Moore, driven far asea by Vallé; but Ivas was thoroughly enjoying the bewildering experience. She liked the giddy reaction, the surprise of it all added zest to life. Only her father's attitude puzzled and pained her. It was not like Barnard Lee to take overmuch notice of any woman, even good-looking, young ones. But Vallé Brooke proved an exception. Apparently Lee could not get her out of his consciousness. She was like something that had violently disagreed with him. He resented and, if the truth were known, feared her. He grew morbid. At one time he weakly imagined her specially designed by John Tremaine to outwit him. He, Barnard Lee! But that was absurd, of course.

Then the qualities in Vallé which overpowered Miss Moore and stimulated Ivas claimed Lee's unwilling consideration. "Perhaps this girl knows everything," he reasoned, "and has married Brooke in order to gain Tremaine's ends." Viewed from this angle, the love between Brooke and Vallé held no place at all. It had simply made possible the designs of others!

"Father," Ivas Lee one day at breakfast asked, "why do you dislike Vallé Brooke?"

Lee resented the question, resented the fact that his manner had suggested that he held any particular sentiment toward his partner's wife.

"That's using rather a strong term, isn't it, Ivas?" he said.

Ivas pushed her plate aside and folded her arms on the table. "No," she replied, "it conveys just what I mean. I'm afraid others will notice it if you are not careful. Father—look at me."

Not to look would prove weakness. Lee gazed rebelliously at his handsome daughter. "Well?"

"Father, your loyalty to me must not carry you astray and make matters worse."

Mr. Lee was not a gasping man, but he came very close to the sensation now. His dislike for Vallé Brooke was based on such different grounds from the one Ivas suspected that for a moment he was dumbfounded and could not reply.

Ivas went on: "I respect your confidence about Vallé father, and you must respect mine about Brian. A good deal depends upon our clear understanding of this."

Ivas was again in the judge's seat and Lee was made angry.

"I dislike your tone and manner," he blurted, a sense of hurt rang in the words. Why could not this

girl of his, above all the world, be loyal to him from instinct?

"And I fear that your manner may be sadly and humiliatingly disastrous," Ivas replied.

"I do dislike and distrust Brooke's wife." Lee was carried out on the current he should have avoided—the current that pervaded his life but was, for the most part, under control. "I think she is a deep young woman. I know she comes of bad stock."

"Father! You seem unlike yourself. Except that I realize *my* part in your feeling I would be ashamed of—of my father!"

Lee rose angrily without a word, but Ivas, rising also, spoke again. "I'll place all my understanding of human nature on one thing," she said. "Vallé Brooke is neither false nor deep. Father, how can you let an old injury, or whatever it is, so distort your good honest common sense? Don't try to play God, Father dear, or if you do, play the rôle rightly."

Lee paused, gave his daughter a long, searching look, yearning to share with her all his secret reasons for his attitude of mind; but instead he said coldly: "Good-morning, my dear."

"And no good-morning kiss, Father?"

Lee bent and kissed the lips now near his own. His lips were icy cold and hard. The hardness Ivas remembered all day.

But Ivas Lee was too sincere and simple a nature to

complicate life unnecessarily and she was modern enough to weigh values and discard many old ones that in their day might have been useful. She, because she was practical, erected a platform sufficiently strong to bear the weight of Brian, herself, and Vallé. There was no sense in useless emotions. Undoubtedly her father knew something discreditable about Vallé's people. Well and good—or, rather, sad and bad—but the past was the past, no matter how one looked at it, and the present was demanding. Vallé had been kept out of her people's life for a reason. A wise one, too, undoubtedly. She had been saved much by the process and Brian—he probably shared her father's confidence—would naturally be drawn to Vallé, not repulsed, by such knowledge.

Mr. Tremaine, Ivas felt sure, had kept his secret, had put Vallé out of his life; and now Brian had accepted the responsibility. It was sporting of Brian and Ivas rallied to his support. It would be touching Brian in the tenderest and finest part of his nature to find that others accepted Vallé. "Well," Ivas vowed, "I will accept her." She raised her head at this. "No matter what Vallé has come out of," she reflected, "she's well out of it and I'm jolly well going to stand by her and Brian."

Could Barnard Lee have heard that, his poor distorted sense of loyalty would have known a deeper pain.

It was Keith Arnold who regarded Vallé without inhibitions or preconceived ideas. Arnold, being too rich for his own good, not gifted enough to be lashed into action, good-natured and untroubled by any exacting code of morals, found his best friend's wife delightful. Vallé's mixture of sophistication and utter ignorance set his blood to quick action.

"How did she get that way?" he often asked himself.

And when in doubt Keith called upon his ancient aunt—Miss Mary Arnold. Unlike Miss Moore, Mary Arnold's house was broad and not over-high and it had never been reconstructed, merely charmingly preserved.

Miss Arnold was rich—richer than she took time to take account of. She left that to her lawyer, an old friend. "The money accumulates," she said to him, "and me lying here unable to squander it. I suppose Keith will get it by and by and go a little faster to the devil." Miss Arnold smiled at this. She knew Keith was *not* going to the devil. He always took a sharp turn just in time to save himself from the devil's clutches.

Miss Arnold was eighty. For years she had been an invalid—some spinal trouble that made reclining on a couch necessary. She had a marvelous bed by night and an equally marvelous couch by day. She wore exquisite silk gowns made by a special designer

and her face, unmarked by the worries of life, was handsome and animated. Stretched on her day couch, gowned to perfection, she looked like some rare conception of age caught halfway between life and death.

A full staff of servants, well trained and of many years' service, ran the house without a hitch. Three nurses and a maid attended Miss Arnold. "And still," she reflected, "the mass of money piles up."

Miss Arnold adored Keith—perhaps more so because he did not clutter her life with his own affairs too often, and because he was eternally finding ways for her to get rid of some of her money; ways that in no wise included his own interests.

No one but Miss Arnold's lawyers knew how many young men she had sent through college—young men suggested by Keith. No one suspected that Miss Arnold, who detested children and had no use for marriage and less for outlawed passion, all but supported a foundling home on the outskirts of New York.

"I hope, Keith," she once baldly asked her nephew, "that there is nothing personal in your interest in this home?"

"On the contrary, Aunt Mary," Keith frankly owned, "it's very personal, to a certain extent. The eyes of children *get* me. They are such dumbfounded eyes and so devilishly piteous."

"Oh, if that's the way you feel about it, Keith, pass me my check book."

After meeting Vallé Brooke several times, Keith decided to pay his aunt a visit. There was enough talent in Arnold to fire his imagination, even if it did not force him to work. There were days and months when it did drive, however, and a time was coming when his secret would betray him. But for the present, just as the eyes of helpless children disturbed his peace, the resemblance between Ivas Lee and Vallé Brooke, the mystery about Vallé's background and Barnard Lee's very evident dislike, engaged Keith Arnold's light and joyous nature.

"By all that's holy," he muttered, "but for the grace of God this charming Vallé Brooke might have come out of Aunt Mary's institution and old Lee might be on to the fact." This was going rather far and so Keith went to his aunt.

"Well," she said, eyeing him from her day couch, "how do you like my new violet gown?"

"Splendid, Mary Jane." Keith's insolence had always delighted Miss Arnold. "You age not, neither do you pall, Mary Jane."

"Oh, some day I'll step into the next room and close the door after me." Miss Arnold patted Keith's knee—he had drawn a chair close. "Will you miss me, boy?"

"Terribly, Mary Jane." Sincerity rang in the voice.

"I know you will, child. But closing a door doesn't finish things. Out of sight but *not* out of mind—eh, Keith?"

"Exactly."

"I've told them to have your rooms ready. Did you look in? Are they all right?"

"Fine, Mary Jane, and until I start for Africa I'll pester the life out of you." These sudden departures of Arnold's were well-disguised jokes and charmingly respected by Miss Arnold.

She laughed. "I've ordered dinner up here," she said. "I'm a selfish old woman. And chess after—eh, boy? And it's Africa this time?"

"Africa's as good as any other place. But Mary Jane, after chess, let us rake up ashes. Something's lost, but I lay a wager that you can unearth it."

"Scandal?"

"Mary Jane, I fear it is."

"Delightful. I haven't had a scandal for many a day. People who call these days feel they must talk of things of the spirit to me. Lord, boy, while there's an ounce of flesh on me it cries out for its own food."

And at this moment servants entered with the first relay of the most perfect dinner Keith had tasted for many a day. Afterward there was chess; both Miss Arnold and Keith were masters of the game and they showed no quarter. The battle waged until eleven o'clock and then it was a tie.

"We must wait until to-morrow for the scandal spice," Keith said, rising and stretching.

"Why? Good heavens, Keith, don't *you* get the spiritual idea about me. There'll be plenty of time for me to rest and sleep when the Door into the Other Room closes on me. I'm at my best after midnight. . . . Smoke—yes, I'll join you. Now, then!"

"You know that Brian Brooke is married?"

"Yes. Not much passes over me. Does the scandal begin there?"

"Lord, no, Mary Jane. What a foul mind you have, my dear. The girl's a charming creature."

"I was thinking of Brian." Miss Arnold flicked her ashes. "With those hide-bound young Galahads one never can tell. Nothing tempts them but temptation and then if they have the real stuff they pay the full price. Brian Brooke has, always did have, the right stuff. He was a great consolation to me while you and he were in college. But go on."

Keith ran on most entertainingly. "She's good-looking, rather unusually so, and quite at her ease," he said, explaining Vallé.

"I thought Brooke picked her up somewhere in the wilds of Canada. Mrs. Marshall called the other day and ran on about this Vallé Brooke."

"Canada is about as well known as Russia," Keith continued. "Almost anything can come out of Canada as long as England stands guard."

"Mrs. Marshall says this girl can play every instrument and that she sings well, too."

"Mrs. Marshall is nearer correct than she usually is, but Vallé Brooke is at her best with a violin."

"I'd like to hear her." Miss Arnold spoke wistfully. "It's things like that that make me rather want to hurry along—music, the theater. I miss them."

"I'll bring her some day," Keith suggested.

"You? Why not Brian? He hasn't been here in almost a year."

"We'll both bring her." A pause; then:

"The odd thing about Vallé Brooke——"

"Where did she get that name?" Miss Arnold broke in. "I never knew but one other person to have it."

"As I was saying, when you rudely broke in, Mary Jane, the odd thing about Vallé Brooke is her resemblance to Ivas Lee."

Another pause. Miss Arnold began to search in the ashes of her long, long past. Keith watched her, ready to snatch any valuable bit she might toss out.

"To Ivas Lee? By the way, Ivas hasn't been here, either, for a long time. I thought she was in love—as well as girls of to-day know how to love—with Brian. It would have been a snap for him. It's to his credit that he didn't snap. A likeness, eh? Just one of your fancies, Keith?"

"No, quite marked—with a difference. Vallé's love-

liness is more appealing, Ivas's too established. But she's an almighty good sport—Ivas, I mean."

There was no reply to this. Miss Arnold was again deep in her ashes. Presently she said: "Lord! how ghosts do stalk. There's no laying them do what we will. Keith, Barnard Lee's wife was named Vallé. She was of French descent—Vallé Dupré was her name. It comes back to me now. She was rather handsome, but a poor, overtrained creature—a product of the Old World ideal. It rather took our breaths when she ran away from Lee, leaving her child. Ivas was three then and the scandal utterly smashed Barnard's well-constructed and orderly life for a time."

"What did she run away for?"

"Probably couldn't stand it any longer. Keith, the one thing that has saved me from matrimony was my early realization that the men one should marry turn out bad husbands, and the ones one should not marry won't run the risk.

"There was a business scandal too, just about that time. It comes back to me now quite clearly. I lost heavily—I got a scare. One Lee, not Barnard though, was mixed up in it. I must say Barnard Lee came out of that clean and hard as nails. He saved his brother from prison by superhuman efforts and by giving up his own private fortune. Lee grew so hard and bitter afterward that people overlooked the good in him and forgot his fine spirit. I always thought that unjust.

But some women can forgive anything easier than having hard nails hammered into them. Lee's wife was like that. She resented a lot of things she couldn't understand. She was a soft creature in some ways. She felt that Barnard was too cruel and hard. There was some talk about her and the rascal brother, and then she ran away."

"To the rascal, Mary Jane?"

"I suppose so. The sinful Lee had a way with him. I never knew him very well, only saw him a few times, but he certainly had a way with him. It's like poison to a man of Lee's type to see a man of his brother's type get away with things in the teeth of dishonesty and whatnot. People who knew the Lees well said there was always fierce jealousy between them."

"Naturally Lee's wife *would* go to his brother under the circumstances," Keith said.

"I suppose so. They all, except Lee, sank out of sight. I think I heard of Mrs. Lee's death in Paris —probably her lover is dead, too. But dear me, now!" Miss Arnold turned her bright eyes upon Keith. "There's an ember! Could it be that this girl, Brian's wife, is possibly——! Oh, dear Lord! what a splendid drama. Do you think any of them suspect, Keith? How I strain against the fetters that hold me."

Then the old voice grew quieter, calmer. "Keith, I've learned one thing above all else. Sleeping dogs are nothing compared to seemingly dead ashes. My

dear, you'd better take one of your idiotic trips. Make it a good long one. I don't like the smother of ashes we've been digging in. Take my advice, boy. I do not often offer it, you know, but I'm tired and—and I want to go to bed and be good." A whimsical smile touched the old face. "Call Bertha—she's on night duty.

"You say this Vallé is happy and pretty and safe with Brian Brooke?"

"Yes, Mary Jane." Keith rose and summoned the night nurse.

"Then let us be very careful, Keith—very. And after I'm in bed come in and kiss me good-night. I'm getting old and senile. One thing more, Keith, take it for what it's worth—it doesn't so much matter what you get out of life for yourself as what you put into life for others. You and Brian were a splendid team. . . . Come now, help Bertha lift me."

CHAPTER X

KEITH ARNOLD remained ten days with his aunt. There were five days of his stay when he feared that she was going into the Next Room; he could all but hear the hinges of the slowly opening Door creak. He was deeply impressed and extremely tender. He spent hours by the night bed and the day couch. He lifted the frail body and kissed the wan face good-night.

"Nice boy!" Miss Arnold would whisper. Then: "Do something with your talent, child. Don't let the mass of money cheat you out of your birthright. I have a hunch——"

"A what, Mary Jane?"

"A good new-fashioned hunch. I'll wager that you will write a play that will make a go! Those things you did at college had the odor of success in their flimsy tatters. There's nothing equal to feeling that you've worked out what's *in* you. All those boys and girls you and I have sent through college, Keith, are ours rightfully. And the babies—Lord! Keith, if I

could have had babies without marrying one of those men I should have married, I'd have gone to the limit. Now you must work, my boy, and those ashes that we scattered about the other night——"

"Never mind, Mary Jane, I've covered them up."

"But there are live embers there, Keith. Don't fan anything into a flame. The wrong person might get burnt."

After a week of uncertainty Mary Arnold rallied and sent for her lawyer.

"I want to see him alone," she told Keith.

To the old lawyer-friend Mary Arnold said: "That boy in the other room has guts, Thomas. I know you don't think so, but he has."

"I haven't the least doubt but that he has something resembling those organs, Mary."

"You may scoff. But when his play is running on Broadway——"

"Is he contemplating anything so mad as that, Mary?"

"Go on scoffing, Thomas, but what I want to say is this. If I shouldn't be there on the opening night——"

"Shall I call your nurse, Mary?"

"Certainly not! As I was saying, if I'm not there that opening night, there's going to be a letter that I want you to give him—just before the curtain goes up."

"Where is the letter, Mary?"

"It's not written yet. It will be."

"Well, old friend, I'm over sixty——"

"Just leave directions then for your successor, whoever he may be, to carry out my wishes."

"Very well, my dear Mary. I'll see to that at once."

"Make sure you do—at once!"

When all immediate danger was past Keith Arnold told his aunt that he had decided upon going to Africa almost at once. "But you can always get me through my lawyer," he said with a cheerful grin; "or, better still, by special letter."

"Good! We've had a splendid visit this time, Keith, and I like to think I'm out of danger. I'm not courting death. Do you think," with a sly smile, "that there'll be light enough in Africa for you to see to—write?"

"I will not go to the darkest part, Mary Jane, and I'm going to work, I promise you."

"That's a good boy. The rest doesn't matter. I'm not going to have any funeral so there'll be nothing to come back for even if I slip through the Door. We've had a most satisfying visit."

Then: "Mary Jane, wouldn't you like to have Vallé Brooke come and play for you?" Keith asked.

"No. Sleeping dogs and ashes, you know. But when you come back from that Africa of yours, perhaps this girl will have a baby by that time. We'll have a

family gathering. There's nothing so steadying as a baby."

And then Arnold slipped away with his handbag.

"I'd give a good deal," Brian said one night a week later to Vallé, "to know if Keith has really gone to Africa. For all his joking, he *may* some time."

"But don't you know he has?"

"Keith is a queer chap. He always was. His sudden departures and lapses are parts of his genius, I suppose. They must be respected by those who love him. To disturb him would be like routing a nice setting hen from her stolen nest. I have a feeling about Keith, I always had, that some day he's going to hatch a golden egg. He really has talent for writing; plays are his special bugs."

"When a man is born with a golden spoon in his mouth," Vallé flung back gayly from the window—she was watching a tall building, off to the south, being transformed into a shaft of light—"he isn't apt to hatch golden eggs, is he? Keith Arnold may have talent but he hasn't any punch. I'll miss him though. In the month that I've been here he's become my friend—he and Ivas."

"And everyone else, Vallé, my darling."

But Vallé shook her head. "I don't like to be disliked," she said. "It gives me a sense of inferiority."

"Oh, you darling!" Brian came to the window and

took the girl in his arms. "Isn't it too cold, dear, with the window open?" he asked.

"No—it makes me think of Hedged In. I had a letter from Kemel Trench to-day."

"Any news?"

"No. There is never any news when the trails are clogged with snow. It's deadly, then, and there has been snow up there. Kemel is staying on at Hedged In. I'm glad. Father still talks of Paris. He does not hint that he wants me to visit the woods. It hurts, Brian, even now."

"It need not, child. Some day we will understand. There must be some answer."

"The answer may be lost. It's queer, Brian, how deeply I love my father and Uncle Stephen though I always feel when with them like an unwanted step-child."

"Come now, sweet—there's the opera and the Lees' box! Wear that silver frock of yours."

"No, darling boy. That frock, for some reason or another, is a red flag to Mr. Lee. He either has too fine a sense about clothes, or a delusion."

"Barnard Lee with a delusion sounds comical, child. The one thing Lee doesn't have is delusions. All right, then, wear that blue thing. You look ravishing in that."

It was a week later that Vallé had an adventure that swept her far, far upon her way. She had been

shopping with Ivas during the morning, had lunched with her and gone to a matinée.

Then Ivas said: "I suppose you must hurry home now to meet Brian? Vallé, what do you think would happen if you failed to materialize when Brian came from the office?"

"I don't know. I hope he would have a bad turn. In my useless life I like to feel some responsibility even if it's only to say hello! when my man comes in."

Ivas laughed.

"But to-night," Vallé went on, "my man isn't coming back to dinner."

"Oh! he's begun that, eh? Or Father has begun it for him? Business, home late. Old stuff." Ivas laughed, but Vallé looked grave.

"I'll be glad when I have a baby, Ivas," she said suddenly.

Ivas started. "More old stuff," she retorted. "Any hopes?"

"No—only dreams. I'd adore it. Don't you like babies, Ivas?"

"In mass, yes. I'll take you some day to the home for babies that Keith Arnold's aunt supports. In mass they are ducky. Singly and personally—no!"

"Oh, Ivas! They're so natural, and they somehow make a woman feel—well, worth her salt. Gives her an excuse for being. I'd hate going on being Brian's wife and not having children. Besides, when he didn't

come back to dinner I'd have something legitimate to do. I am always receiving things from Brian—never really being depended upon."

"Come home with me now, Vallé. I'll lay a wager my father and Brian are together. We'll telephone. And it's all rot that you're talking. You're important enough."

"No—you've had enough of me for one day, Ivas. I must say good-bye."

"Don't tell me you're feeling any duty to Miss Moore? I happen to know it's her bridge night and dinner at the Marshalls'." Then:

"Forgive me, Vallé, I've no right to snoop. Go to the—the devil if you want to. I mean, you have a right to do what you want to do. I'm actually taking on leech-like attributes. Here's a taxi. Want to share it?"

"No—I want a walk." But she had not gone far when suddenly she felt exhausted. She looked about for a taxi, but being on a side street, none was at hand. There was an art exhibit, though, and there was still time for a rest inside. Among other delights Vallé had discovered the exquisite peace and quiet of an art gallery on a side street—occasionally there were lovely pictures, too, by artists who were arriving but had not quite made the goal.

She turned in. The man in charge smiled a welcome.

"Am I too late?" Vallé asked.

"Not at all. We do not close until six. You want

to see Snowbound I suppose? The artist is well worth while but only a few realize it. Such snow! You can almost hear it crisp under foot, and such bare trees with life at their roots! Right over there—there's a man looking at it now. A shabby fellow but he knows the real thing."

Vallé went over to the far side of the room and looked up at the canvas. It was well hung and as she looked at it a sob caught in her throat. She was tired, a bit lonely, and that snow and trees were Hedged In! Really, Hedged In. A fancy, of course. Forgetting the man on the bench, Vallé dropped down beside him, her eyes clinging to the picture. The man at the other end of the seat turned. Then:

"Well!"

Vallé's eyes dropped and she looked straight into the face of Keith Arnold.

"Hell!" muttered Arnold.

"I thought you were on your way to—to Africa," Vallé exclaimed in surprise.

"Please lower your voice, Vallé. I *am* on my way to Africa. Keep that well in mind. You ran me down, not I, you."

"That's true. But what has that to do with it?"

Keith made a sudden resolve. He was used to leaping over social chasms—he counted on making a foothold. He took his chance now. He laughed. So did

Vallé. Suddenly her weariness and loneliness disappeared.

"I am discovered in this disguise!" Arnold grinned.

"You do look shabby. Been shipwrecked?" It was amazingly easy to fall into Arnold's mood—that had been his charm with Vallé from the first.

"That remains to be seen. Anyway, Vallé, I'm at your mercy, and if I own up and you are the woman I take you to be, I may yet be saved."

"Consider yourself saved."

"It's too late to talk here. This shop closes at six—it's five forty-five now. What are you doing, just until dinner time?"

"Nothing. Brian is to dine with Mr. Lee—business you know. Miss Moore is away—dinner and bridge."

"Looks as if my fairy godmother had come upon the scene," Keith laughed.

"And mine!"

"You mean that, Vallé?"

"I mean, now that I've got over the shock of seeing you, that I'm quite excited."

"Will you come to dinner with me?"

"Where, on this desert place of yours?"

"I'll go to the limit in my faith in you. I'll take you to my lair. I have some scraps there, a gorgeous fire, and a stuffed chair! You'll have to be blindfolded on the way there, however."

"Don't be too fantastic, Keith Arnold. I'm rather a

sensible person, and after all you've got to explain about Africa."

"I will, and you shall share the secret of the one holy thrill that life holds for me—this of escaping in disguise. Will you come?"

"Yes."

Strange as it might seem, Vallé got so confused on the taxi trip downtown that she might just as well have been blindfolded. She knew they were going downtown, but that was all. The rushing traffic at that time of day, a flurry of snow that blurred the figures on the electric-light post, and Arnold's gay nonsense all combined to convince her, at last, that she might just as well give up any idea of playing the detective and get what fun she could out of the adventure.

"Is this place, to which you are taking me, your only refuge when you want to elude your friends?" she asked above the clatter of the street noises.

"No, I have another over in Jersey in the dullest of Jersey towns, and that's saying a good deal. In the season it has its good points, and certainly no one would ferret me out there. I have another lair up in the Adirondacks, but that has temptations that overcome my desire for work. This den to which we are going is perfect, and if you don't betray me, I may yet become famous. I'm writing."

"You won't mind Brian knowing? He'd think it

great sport. And Brian is like a—like a safe when it comes to secrets."

"See here, Vallé, Brian least of all is to know, now. Unless you'll promise I'll drop you at the next corner and I'll sail to-morrow for some distant, damned place. I swear I mean it. I have a piece of work well on the way; I'm quite serious when I say that I have to sneak off, in disguise, to do my stunt, and I'm equally earnest when I say that I have an old aunt of whom I'm very fond who needs me. She's been ill. I can keep in touch with her without anyone else knowing of it. This is my way of doing things. They may sound like idiotic capers, but I have a right to my capers."

"Of course you have, and your aunt—I remember now. Miss Arnold? I recall Brian said the other night that she had been sick. He thought it rather—well, heartless—your going away just now."

"As well it might if I were far away. And could you drive me far from my dying aunt by tattling?"

"Don't be absurd, Keith."

They were well downtown now, spinning along Fifth Avenue. Here and there, among high and fashionable apartment houses, old office buildings stubbornly stood. Before one of these the taxi stopped. Arnold paid the driver and hurried Vallé into the wide, dim hall.

"Good-evening, Mr. Bryant," wheezed an old, bleary-eyed elevator man. "Going up, sir?"

"Up, Murphy, and down after a while. You on for the night?"

"Yes, sir." The elevator, as wheezy as the old man, creaked and jerked up.

"One never knows," said Arnold, "what may *not* happen here."

"I see you have a new name, Keith?" This in a whisper.

"I have many for myself and my friends."

They were at the top at last and got out. The decrepit elevator at once began its descent and Arnold opened a door and pushed Vallé into his room. Then he turned on the light—a dim one. The room was merely disclosed.

"Oh!" Vallé gave a cry.

It was a massive room. Windows, to the west and east, uncurtained and clear—opened to the sky across which now a blur of snow was swirling. A chimney of brick rose at one end of the room, from floor to ceiling, and a ruddy fire, carefully screened, was giving a welcoming glow and heat. Corner closets, behind leaded panes of glass, held secrets; screens, several of them, hid more. There were some rugs on the floor and the chairs. Tables and couches were old but their shabbiness was concealed under gay coverings.

"It's like Hedged In! Oh, Keith! I adore it."

At this Arnold turned on more light and Vallé saw that his face was glowing with pleasure.

"Now then," he said, "off with your wraps. Here, throw them anywhere. Now settle down by the fire and I'll dig up some bones for us to munch. Talk away. I'll only be behind screens when I'm out of sight. I sleep behind that screen, my kitchen is over there. I live all over the place—the only sacred thing in the room is the big table. Lay off that—for the rest snoop to your heart's content."

"But I'd like to help, Keith—digging bones, you know."

"Not to-night. When you come again I'll probably let you do it all. To-night you're my quarry, my stolen princess, and I want to make a good impression."

"How ridiculous you are, Keith, and there are to be no future times."

"What will you bet on that?"

"Not unless we tell Brian."

"Don't be a stuff, Vallé—you do the pose awkwardly. You're too vital to suggest a stuff."

"I'm afraid you do not understand, Keith."

"What?"

Vallé refused to explain.

Presently from screened quarters arose tempting odors and familiar, homely sounds. A more or less adept man was at an unusual task.

"You might hunt in that chest of drawers," Keith presently called, "and take out napkins and silver for two and lay the table."

"The big one?"

"You dare! Try that and I'll have *you* for dinner, raw!"

"Which table then? There are so many."

"Any that strikes your fancy and is large enough for two."

Vallé moved about and gathered napkins, silver, and china; she took two candlesticks from a shelf and lighted the tall white candles. It was like taking part in a play—a pantomime—on her part, but Keith kept up a constant stream of conversation from behind his screen.

"Like chops?"

"Rather—Mr. Bryant. I hope you have more than two."

"I should hope so, for I'm not an unselfish individual. But here, young woman, don't take that name of mine in vain."

"Why didn't you choose a better one while you were about it?"

"I rather like that. My Jersey title is Dennis Hogarty. I think they take me for a bootlegger over there."

"You'll get into trouble some day, Keith."

"I'm never out of trouble until I slip into one of my disguises. So far they've been safe. Here comes the first relay." Flushed and triumphant, Arnold came in bearing a large tray.

Vallé scanned the dishes. "I do not see how you ever did it!" she exclaimed, "and in such a short time."

"Magic, Vallé. Fall to. There's a bottle of wine to cap off with," Arnold comforted. "When you come next time we'll have dessert—anything you fancy. Like cheese?"

"Very much."

"You would, of course, having been brought up in England."

"They do not live on cheese there."

"No, but they educate you about it. Smoke, Vallé?"

"Occasionally."

"Now?"

"Yes, please."

"Good girl! I'll have these dishes off in a jiffy. Lord! you've scraped your plates, girl. That's the highest compliment a guest can pay."

Presently Arnold was back and all signs of the jolly little meal were gone. Then quite seriously he spoke, sitting across the hearth from Vallé.

"I wish you'd let me tell you the theme of my—my play."

"I'd love that." Vallé settled into the big chair.

"I think the one element lacking in my past experiments has been the help of a good friend at a critical moment," Keith went on, watching Vallé. "That's the price I had to pay for my self-imposed exile."

"I know nothing about plays or play writing, Keith."

"But you are intelligent—the kind of person I'd like in my audiences."

"Oh, I see! You want me to clap."

"No—not unless you cannot help it. I'd like to watch your face. You have an awful responsibility with your face, Vallé. It gets beyond your control at times."

"I'm sorry. I must seem awfully immature."

"No, simply inspiring."

"Oh!"

"May I begin?"

"I'm listening, Keith. Can you see my face?"

"May I stare?"

"Within bounds, yes."

Arnold was a clever relater of his plot and his eyes rarely left Vallé's face, but presently she was completely at her ease. Arnold was, fortunately, impersonal in his attention. It was her reactions he was keen about—not her.

"You see, I want to show the effect of hate and jealousy upon a really decent and honest nature," he began. "I want to trace the poison and also the redeeming quality of suffering on a nature *not* naturally decent in some vital ways. Two men with a big motive. It's something I got from that aunt of mine."

"That sounds very interesting, but can you get so —so much of life into a play?"

Keith smiled at the question. "All that is the ocean," he said slowly, "is in one drop of the ocean."

Vallé smiled. "Not all," she shook her head. "Not the storm and the glorious color."

"But they are not the ocean, Vallé. They are effects upon the ocean of outside influences."

"Oh! I see."

"Do you really?" Keith's eyes grew brooding.

"A little. Yes."

"I knew that you would."

Then, after a pause during which Arnold piled logs on the fire, he said: "The first act is here—in New York. The scene between the brothers. One has, in a scoundrelly way, involved the honor and fortunes of the family. The other brother, to cover the shame and redeem what he can, offers terms. He will put every dollar that he has to the wiping out of the brother's indebtedness, but on the other hand he demands that his brother assume another name, leave all that he has called home and social ties—go into exile, in short—and so long as he remain an exile the brother will give him a yearly sum, enough to keep starvation off."

"And he accepts? He doesn't defy the brother and try to save himself?" Vallé was deeply interested.

"You forget—the alternative is dishonor for the family and a prison term for him?"

"I see." Vallé was absorbed, but Keith, watching

her keenly, could see no evidence of a personal interest in the story.

"The second act must, of course, be the scene of exile. And oh! by the way, there was a woman, the wronged brother's wife."

"One of those heartbreaking triangles?" Vallé asked.

"Yes—there seems to be no other way."

"I suppose not, in a play. Go on."

"I would like to ask you, Vallé—would the woman go into exile with her lover?"

"What else could she do—in your play?"

"I mean in life. Could there be a woman so true to herself that she might love her lover and yet not be willing to cast more shame upon her husband? She might see his courage and character in the way he assumed responsibility, you know, and that might hold her back. It might and it might not."

"Yes, and at the same time she would be able to see the cruelty of the alternative."

"Yes, I've thought of that, Vallé."

"And the third act—Keith, hurry. I must go."

A tall clock in the corner chimed nine in soft, suggestive tone.

"The third act, Vallé—you and I must muddle over that together." Keith rose, gathered Vallé's coat and hat and brought them to her. "I'll put you in a cab at the door," he said, "and you will guard my door, not

let anyone disturb me, not send me into exile? In short, keep your rather lovely mouth shut?"

"You are asking a great deal, Keith."

"I know I am."

Instead of taking the elevator, they walked down the dark, winding stairway, an electric light on each landing marking the stations of their descent. They hardly spoke until they reached the street door. Then Arnold said:

"It has been a marvelous evening, thanks to you, Vallé."

"It has been wonderful. Good-night. There's a taxi."

Arnold hailed it, and as Vallé got in he said: "Until next time—good-night."

Standing bareheaded on the sidewalk after the cab rattled off, Arnold looked up. There were still some fluttering flakes of snow in the air, and he said to himself: "She does not know, or suspect. And the name of this play shall be: *Let Ashes Rest.*"

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Brian reached home the night of Vallé's visit to Arnold's studio he smiled to himself as he looked at the hastily discarded clothing over a chair. In some ways Vallé was shockingly careless. On the fur coat there were still some evidences of the snow which had fallen upon it. He went into the inner room and was not surprised to find Vallé awake and her eyes shining.

"Glad to see me?" he asked, leaning over to kiss her.

"Very."

"Been prowling, I see, instead of grieving your life out waiting for your husband, ma'am!"

"I am discovered!"

"You are—wretch!" Brooke bent and kissed her again.

Vallé's arms held him close. "Dear, safe, and good man," she whispered.

"Umph! doubtful compliments. Any secrets to disclose?"

"None—ogre!"

"Find any loot on the prowl?"

"There's always treasure in this town." Then, and Vallé had a twinge of conscience, "I saw a most appealing picture to-day, Brian. It was like the woods around Hedged In. It tugged at my heart. I want you to come with me and see it."

"I will, dear, and I do ask you to be a bit careful. This city may have other treasure hunters, you know."

"Nice boy! But I take taxis—the colored ones that Aunt Constance says are run by men whose integrity cannot be doubted!"

Brian laughed and pushed Vallé lightly back on the pillows. "Now calm down, child," he said. "I am not going to make a practice of leaving you evenings, but Mr. Lee has a client who is hell bent upon buying some property that a stubborn tenant with a long lease will not give up. We're concocting some terms to tempt the entrenched brute. It means a big thing, if we succeed, to the firm of Lee, Crawford & Brooke."

It was several days before Vallé saw any prospect of going to Arnold's studio again. During that time several emotions rose to the surface and frightened her by the erratic proportions they assumed. She discovered that she wanted to go again and put up no opposition to the desire; she was actually seeking an excuse for going. She was tremendously interested in Arnold's plot. It haunted her. She had a few ideas to offer now about that woman of his. She hoped, in

some way, that Keith would communicate with her.

Finally Arnold got into her consciousness in quite a new and disturbing fashion. In a way she appropriated him. He did not seem in any way to be concerned with Brian. He was peculiarly her friend. He needed her and she him. It was rather exciting to be useful. Then Vallé did some straight thinking. She did some comparing, too, and this had power to rouse certain qualities in her that marked her character. She had lived too detached a life, too lonely a one, to rush ahead heedlessly. In a very real sense she had, all her life, been guarding against missteps. At school, at Hedged In; always there had been the necessity for caution if she was to hold what small gains she made in the affection of others. And now she must make no mistakes.

She considered things. Would Brian object if he knew? "If he *knew* he wouldn't, of course." That was honest enough, but *until* he knew? That opened a wide vista. After all, it wasn't Brian about whom she was questioning. It was others—Miss Moore, Ivas, but most of all Barnard Lee! At this Vallé stiffened. Between her and Barnard Lee was a constant state of truce. At any moment it might fail. What then? "This is ugly rubbish," Vallé decided at last. "I am growing an evil mind, and, worse yet, a silly one." She must prove herself above such weak reasoning. So she began to plan some way to see Keith Arnold

again. Then Fate, in cap and bells, played into her hand.

"I've got to go with Mr. Lee," Brian told her one morning in late October, "out of town for several days. It's about that wretched business I told you of—the property and the stubborn tenant. I'd ask you to come with us, dear, but the accommodations where we are going are rough and——"

"Mr. Lee just couldn't stand it." Vallé laughed lightly. "You see now, don't you, Brian, that I am no idol of Mr. Lee's?"

"I cannot understand Mr. Lee." Brooke looked ugly, for lately Lee had been more brusque than formerly.

"Never mind, dear boy. I do not care much. Not at all except for you. The rest of your people are lovely to me. Ivas is precious. I never had a dearer friend. And Aunt Constance is—well, fitting me into her plan. She had to hew out a place for me, you see. I just naturally didn't fit at first and she resented it."

"Dear girl!" Brooke looked adoringly at Vallé. "And you'll be with Ivas a good deal while I'm away?"

"We'll plan splendid things, Brian. Do not worry. I'm not that kind of wife."

"What kind?"

"The kind you'd have to worry about."

"I know that."

Brooke and Lee started early Saturday morning on their up-state trip.

Miss Moore planned a dinner party and theater for the evening, and Ivas proposed a motor trip out of town for Sunday.

"I know the jolliest place for lunch," she said. "They have the most marvelous lobster. Will you come?"

"Yes." Then suddenly, "But I'd like to be back by five."

"That's easy." Vallé had written to Arnold and planned to go to the studio. She had not heard from him, but she meant to risk a visit.

"I suppose you want to rest," Ivas said. Then: "Are you ever really tired?" she asked.

"I do not want to be. Why should I be—just having fun? It would be sheer ingratitude for me to be tired. No, it's my job to be in fine trim all the time."

"Still harping on that 'kept woman' idea, Vallé?" Ivas tossed her head. "Do be sensible," she went on. "It's a big thing to hold the position you do in a man's life. You are what he wants—isn't that enough?"

"Not for me, Ivas; not unless I am what I think he should have. He should need me—not just want me. I must have my own home and make it a life work for Brian and me. I do hope I have children, lots of them. Such things keep women worth while and prove their excuse for being, as I've told you."

"Vallé, there are times when you make me positively ill." Ivas flung herself into a chair and scowled. "Can't you see what kind of a life, what kind of a world, it would be if there were no luxuries, just plain grubs? It would be Russia at its worst. You and I, by divine Providence, are luxuries. Why can't you be a nice, grateful luxury? You're getting restless, Vallé." There were tears in Ivas's eyes. "You must not let Brian see you so—it would hurt him cruelly."

Vallé went close to her. "You're just talking," she said. "Do you think I could fail Brian?"

"I'm thoroughly outraged with you, Vallé. Why, if I——" Then Ivas paused and laughed. "Lord! you'll drive me into marrying a poor man," she went on, "and showing you what I mean by developing into a drudge—a drab one at that—and then you'll appreciate your blessed state."

The all-day motor trip was delightful and Vallé reached home before five. Miss Moore was out; only one maid was left in charge. Vallé worked fast. She ran to her room and dressed in a long dark fur coat, the collar of which, when turned up, quite hid her face. A small close-fitting hat added to the security of disguise. Then, on the spur of inspiration, she snatched her violin and hurried out. She had been careful, when leaving Arnold before, to note the number of the building. But would it be opened? She had not heard from Arnold. Would the elevator be

running? Vallé decided that she would in any case go up the stairs. One had only to go to the top and the door of Arnold's studio was painted green! If he were not there no one would ever know. The very uncertainty was thrilling.

It was all quite easy. The street door of the grim office building was ajar—the stairs were open to any chance vagrant. It was a long climb, a hard one, and, quite breathless, Vallé came to the green door at last. For the first time her adventure took on an aspect that daunted her. For a moment she decided to go noiselessly down the stairs, but that moment gave Arnold time, in his silent room, to hear a stirring at his door. He was keenly alive to every sound; he had worked hard for ten hours, eaten little, smoked a good deal, and taken two or three stiff drinks to keep him going. He hoped that Vallé Brooke would not come. He had not replied to her note, and had almost forgotten it and her. He was getting a bit bored with his exile and wanted to bring it to a close. It had irritated him, too, Vallé's suggesting that she come. It surprised him—puzzled him. He was in disorder as to dress, he needed a shave, and his hair stood on end.

"Who's there?" he muttered angrily, and striding to the door flung it open. For an instant he did not see Vallé, then he laughed and pulled her in.

"You? What in thunder——" The door closed upon them.

"You did not answer my note," Vallé said. Then: "I brought my violin—soft music, you know, during the tense moments." She laughed nervously and added: "Now that I am here, I'm frightened almost to death! What must you think of me?"

Arnold drew her to a chair and declined to express an opinion.

"Take off your things," he merely ordered. "We'll have something to eat. I haven't touched a morsel since eight this morning." His irritation was passing.

"You look it. Excuse me, Keith, but you simply look a wreck. Now you lie down and let me rummage for bones. We'll have high tea! I've come uninvited this time."

"High what?" Arnold smiled. "And besides you're welcome, Vallé." Now that she was near him, he realized how glad he was to see her.

"High tea."

"Make it coffee, and call out if you need help." Arnold flung himself, exhausted, on the couch, relaxing as he heard Vallé's energetic efforts among cans and boxes. "You're a great sport," he said. "How in the name of wonder did you manage——"

"What?"

"This getaway. I did not write because——"

And then Vallé broke in: "Brian is out of town. Business. Oh! I've found a cold chicken."

"Business!" Keith cried from the other side of the

screen. "Business! The devil's first move in the losing game."

Vallé came into view with the cold chicken on a platter. "One more suggestion of that kind," she said quietly, "and there'll be no soft music to-night or ever!" Something like a blurring fog was closing about her; she set down the dish she bore unsmilingly.

"Forgive me, Vallé."

"When you talk like that——"

"I'll never talk that way again, Vallé. I swear. You see, I'm about all in and the sight of you made me——"

"Extremely idiotic," Vallé finished the sentence. Then: "Get up and make yourself respectable looking. I suppose there's a screen behind which you can perform that miracle. I've dug up a perfect feast; the coffee will soon be ready."

The air was again cleared. From behind a screen Vallé presently heard splashing water, the contented humming of a popular air. She set the small table by the fire, lighted the candles, and ran to and fro from fireside to screened kitchen. Being in action helped to clear the fog.

"Lord! but that coffee smells good." This from Keith. "There are potato chips in a glass jar."

"They're in the oven now," this from Vallé, "and I've unearthed a perfect wealth of jams and cookies."

"Go to it, child!"

And then followed the gay little meal.

They settled down at last before the fire, all signs of the feast removed and Arnold at his ease and in the serenest of moods.

"Will you play," he asked, "and sing one of those old things you sang when I first saw you?"

"Yes, and afterward you'll tell me what you're doing?"

"I'll tell you while you play—softly."

"Fine!"

Vallé stood up beside the chimney and tucked her violin under her chin. "You may sleep if you'd rather," she said, tuning the instrument. "You look quite done up, poor Keith! So unused to toil."

"It is to laugh, Vallé—but we're not laughing, are we?"

"No."

There was a song or two, some wild, witchy tunes running into each other, and presently Keith was telling something of what he had worked out. Fearing to interrupt the flow of his thought, Vallé played on and on, just a note here and there that carried a suggestion of tune.

"You know we got as far as whether the woman went into exile with her lover."

"Yes."

"Well, I've struck off the beaten track. She didn't!

There was a child, a perfectly legitimate one, but under the circumstances the woman dared not tell; she knew that she would not be believed by her husband. Rather a nice situation, I think. She loves the exiled brother, but has never been his mistress. She goes to some God-forsaken place and sends word to the man in his exile. She hopes he will come to her. That kind of woman would. He goes to her. The child is born; the woman dies. You see, it's the child that must be the heroine. All this will mean readjustment of the first scene. The lover takes the child back with him into exile, you know, and the blood money—you remember that?—will be used for the support of the brother's child. Quite an appeal. Don't you think so, Vallé? Almost too weird to be true, but all the more engrossing."

"Yes, but the whole thing is getting so big, Keith."

"A lot of it is background; a few conversations will dispose of that. You see, I'm giving you the whole thing. Selection will follow, naturally. By the way, the child is a girl, and in the perfected play she's the heroine and the man who loves her, the hero."

"You've changed your whole plot, Keith. It is not to be a triangle, then?"

"Not exactly—a group, rather." Then: "Don't forget the drop of ocean water. Knocking this into shape will be the hard part, but I think I can do it. . . .

Play on, Vallé. While you play, while you stand there, everything seems easy."

"It's quite different—life and a play," Vallé said, striking into a new tune. "Life messes things so and gets into so many snarls, but a play can show what might be, minus messes. Do you think you can do it, Keith?"

"Yes, I think I can."

"When can I hear some of it read? The play, I mean, not just the story. Your telling is all right, but I want to see it on the way toward completion."

"I'm going to get into grips with it to-morrow. I mean regulating it, sifting material and all that. Lord! Vallé, looked upon poetically, you are a 'gift of God.' "

"But looked upon prosaically, I'm breaking the rules of the road and must hurry back."

"What rules? What road?" Arnold was holding the long coat for Vallé.

"Why, there is a road, isn't there? And—and rules?" she asked, slipping into her coat. It always made her self-conscious when Arnold turned her words against her and assumed things that she only half meant.

"Oh! for those who must depend upon them, I suppose roads are necessary," Arnold laughed.

"And what else is there?" Vallé was drawing on

her long gloves, her eyes intent upon what she was doing.

"Wings—and the free skies."

"And that is nonsense, Keith, you know. Do not come down with me—get to work. All the material you have is rather staggering. The sifting, as you call it, is going to test your——"

"What, Vallé?"

"Well, your endurance and patience."

"Not my—talent? You think I have a bit of talent, Vallé?"

"I think you have a good deal. If you do not get it mixed up with other things, you are coming out all right."

"I wonder, Vallé, if you can possibly know what you are doing for me?"

They were moving toward the door.

"I hope I am helping a little. I sound awfully queer to myself—suggesting things to you, trying to direct you."

"And taking an interest, being an—an inspiration, in short."

They stood at the open door now.

"You are placing a perilous value on my help, as you call it, Keith. To make me feel that I am doing what you say quite thrills me. To be needed—oh! that's a rare sensation."

"You mean that you are *not* needed?"

"I mean that all my life I've wanted to be necessary."

"And to Brian you are *not* necessary?"

"He thinks I am, but he is so—what shall I say? sufficient—and he is so terribly necessary to others."

"To—you?"

"Absolutely, to me. So you see this little venture of mine into a new line is rather breath-taking. Good-night."

"You will not let me go down with you?"

"I'd rather not."

"Good-night then, and come soon."

The following day a telegram came from Brooke—a long, rather intimate one. Mr. Lee was returning, a sudden call for him had come; but Brooke must stay on for a few days. Things were critical.

Vallé felt desperately dismayed by the news. In some vague way she was counting upon Brooke's immediate return as a solution to some strange unrest. The more she strove to classify her unrest the more restless she became. She passed most of her days with Ivas or Miss Moore, but the senseless insistence upon filling in time made it appear that she was afraid that unless she did—— Well, why shouldn't she go to Arnold's studio and help him—if she really could help him? Not to go proved how utterly senseless she was. Brian would, some day, laugh with her and Keith about all this side play. In order to prove herself, so

Vallé thought, she went to the studio several times during the week that Brooke was away.

The big, quiet room seemed the only place where she could really relax and be quite herself. Its resemblance to Hedged In comforted her; Keith Arnold's perfect companionship was growing daily more reassuring; Vallé was enjoying her rôle of inspirer. Arnold had done some sifting. The first act was in fairly concrete and vital form, it held attention. Keith seemed to forget Vallé's presence, at times, and except for urging her to go on with her music, was indifferent to her.

"I really seem to mean something to him," she thought, and glowed with satisfaction. Things had righted themselves. No longer was there any unrest nor foolish arguments.

It was the day before Brooke was expected back that Vallé went to the studio rather earlier than usual to hear the completed first act. It was storming. Rain and snow combined to make a dismal day—the streets were slushy, the sky heavy and sullen. The studio was like a warm, bright heart in the midst of the muck of things.

"Oh! but it is good here," Vallé cried as Arnold took her damp coat and hat.

"You had a taxi, didn't you?" he asked.

"No, I walked. I'm deadly tired."

"You're mad to do such wild things, Vallé. You'll make yourself ill."

"I've taken many and worse walks. I knew that after such a tussle this place would seem all the dearer. Make me some tea, Keith. I'll be ready then to play for you."

Arnold brewed the tea and made the fire hotter. "Lord! but you do fit in," he said happily, "and it was such a devil of a day I feared you might not come."

"But—you've worked?"

"Like a galley slave." They smiled at each other happily.

"Brian comes back to-morrow." This over her cup of tea.

"That's good," Arnold said—"only I'm afraid it will interrupt our work at a critical time."

"Our work! Oh, Keith, but you are satisfying. Our work, indeed. Well, then let me take Brian into our confidence and I'll come every day."

"And not without?"

"Certainly not."

"Why?"

"Don't be idiotic. There now! get out the play. Started on the second act?"

"Just started when you interrupted me by coming in." They could laugh at this.

The wet snow splashed against the high windows;

the short day was fading, but in the warm, bright room were the soft notes of the violin and Arnold's clear fine voice, and all else was forgotten.

"And that is as far as you've got? Why, Keith, you have a thrilling situation. I'm wondering just how your girl is going to deal with the problem."

"So am I! What—are you going, Vallé? It's only a little after six. I thought we'd have rather a feast to-night."

"No, I'm going. You see, Brian might get in to-night. I wouldn't be away when he comes for——"

"Just what, Vallé?"

"Anything. He's been gone ten days."

Arnold held the coat ready and Vallé slipped in. Then, suddenly, Arnold's arms closed about her; she was turned quickly, her face uplifted to his.

"You are quite the most wonderful thing in all the world, Vallé." Arnold's voice was low, his words hurried, and then his lips were on hers. She was never to forget that kiss. It broke down all the ignorance and blind weakness of her shabby defense. She did not struggle or cry out, and in a moment Arnold let her go. Even then she stood still, looking at him.

What Arnold expected he hardly knew, but her silence and the quivering light in her eyes amazed, then angered him.

"I hope you are not going to say the usual things, Vallé. They would be damned rot, you know."

"The usual things—what would they be, Keith?"

"I think you understand. You must have known——"

"What?"

"What you've grown to mean to me, my work, my happiness."

"I wonder if I should have known!"

"I—I haven't dragged you here, Vallé. Let me keep some of my self-respect."

"No—I've come quite freely, even uninvited. I begin to see what you mean. I should have known."

"But you didn't? Oh, come, Vallé!"

"I—I really didn't, until now."

"And now? You're not the sort of girl to not understand, Vallé."

"I see I am not, Keith. I do not blame you in the least. I'll prove that to you some day. I must go now."

"Vallé, can you forgive me?"

Vallé laughed. "There's nothing to forgive, really. Nothing."

They went down the dark winding stairs together. At the door Arnold called a passing cab and, bareheaded, walked with Vallé to it.

"My dear, my dear," he said, "I am sorry." Then Vallé amazed him by saying quietly:

"Do you know, Keith, I am not. Somehow this has

shown me what life can do to one—when one is off guard."

Brian returned the next day. His coming seemed to reëstablish something that had been perilously near crumbling. His business had been successful. He was back where most he wanted to be—his happiness and cheerfulness reduced everything, at least most things, to normal.

It was while this sense of safety and escape held Vallé that she first knew, or hoped, she was to have a child. So overpowering was the thought, so fearful was she of being mistaken, that for days she kept the bewildering joy to herself. It seemed to clarify and sanctify everything and justify it as well. Her restlessness, her foolishness, all was understandable. There was but one thing in all the world that truly mattered. In that mood of exaltation she confided her hope to Brian. She felt that he must share every hour of happiness with her.

That was in early November, and the day before Christmas the tragedy, unlooked for, utterly unprepared for, occurred. Vallé was taken desperately ill and was hurried to a hospital.

So shocked and surprised was Constance Moore that she sent for Ivas Lee.

"Did you know anything about this?" she asked, feeling that she had been kept in ignorance.

"No," Ivas replied, "how should I? Why should I?

It may be only a precaution, her going to the hospital. Vallé would have told you——"

"You are wrong, Ivas. She would have told me last of all. Vallé is young, strong. You certainly know what this means, don't you?"

"I do not in the least know what you mean, Miss Moore." Ivas was genuinely puzzled.

Miss Moore, all the small and hidden resentments and dislikes rising to the surface, lost control of herself and she was in a highly nervous state.

"Ivas, I have always doubted Vallé's love for Brian, have you?"

"No, Miss Moore."

"Do you think if she loved him she would have done what she has done now?"

"What has she done? Good heavens, Miss Moore! I am as shocked as you are, but I haven't lost my head. What do you mean?"

"Ivas, a young, healthy girl does not——"

"You mean," Ivas confronted Miss Moore and flung out—"you mean that Vallé has tried to get rid of her child?"

"What else, my dear girl?" Miss Moore was amazed at Ivas's terrible frankness.

"What else?" Ivas's face flamed with indignation. "What else? Listen to me, Miss Moore." Then, borne along on such conflicting emotions that they all but choked her, Ivas defended Vallé as best she could. It

was the only decent thing she dared do, though her love for Brian, her envy of all that Vallé had and she had *not,* racked her. "She wanted a child, Miss Moore. She wanted it from the first. This—this may kill her—kill her——" And then, blinded by a white light of fear and determination to right Vallé at any cost, she cried: "You—my father—have never given her a chance. You've tried to make her pay the debt of others."

"The debt of others," Miss Moore retreated. "What debt, Ivas? What debt?"

"I'm going to find out, Miss Moore, and when I do I'll tell you. I promise you that. I know a little, but I will know more. I'm going to understand this aversion to Vallé and I'm going to conquer it."

And then Miss Moore was alone, afraid to move in any direction. Her orderly life was quaking about her. The tall walls of her narrow house were threatened. Whatever props she could summon she did, but the quaking continued. What debt was it to which Ivas referred? "If Vallé does not come through this," and the last report from the hospital was alarming, "then—" and Miss Moore clenched her hands and something of the reconstructionist rose within her—"then Brian will, indeed, need me again and the future will justify everything."

Ivas, in no state of mind to deal with any delicate matter, went from Miss Moore's home and waited in

her father's private library for his return. Why she wanted specially to see him, what she was going to say to him when she did see him, she hardly knew. Vallé's sudden illness, the danger that she was in—for Ivas, too, had the latest bulletin from the hospital—upset her terribly, and because, to a certain extent, her defense of Vallé had always been more or less forced, she was prepared now to go to any lengths. Ivas was verging upon an hysterical state, and because it was the first time in her life she had ever been attacked by her nerves she was utterly incompetent to deal with them. When she heard her father's step in the hall she stiffened, she did not weaken.

"I'm here, Father."

Lee came in. "I'm glad to see you——"

"Father, I suppose you know——"

"About Vallé Brooke? Yes. Brian was sent for in a hurry."

"She's in danger, Father."

"Such things are dangerous, my dear, very dangerous."

"Father, do you think——?"

Lee shrugged his shoulders and sat down in an easy chair. "What else can one think, my dear?" If he must deal with reality he would, but he shrank from it.

These two understood each other better than Miss Moore and Ivas had; they did not bandy words.

"You're quite wrong, Father. Your dislike for

Vallé makes you unjust. She wanted a child. She told me so."

Barnard Lee fixed his eyes sternly on his daughter. As always, her quick disapproval of him when most he longed for her blind allegiance hurt him cruelly, childishly. "See here, Ivas," he asked angrily, "I wonder if you think you know that young woman as well as—as I, for instance?"

"You? Why, Father, you haven't even tried to know her."

"The knowledge has been forced upon me," Lee retorted.

"Father! I know what you mean. You are making Vallé pay for what her father did to you long ago. You've let your hate for her father reach out and claim her. Father, I know you were disappointed. I—I love you for that, in a way, but Father, if I can stand that—can't you? Do be just to Vallé. I know how your manner toward her hurts Brian. It will all end so miserably and I'll be hurt all the more. Can't you understand? Vallé is suffering; she's in danger; what has she ever done to you, to me——"

Lee waited, and then, seeing that Ivas's emotions had come to a standstill, he took his opportunity. "Just why you should so readily conclude that I am a senseless and ruthless hater, Ivas, I do not know. I can only say that you hurt me deeply. If I have spared you and others it is because I am not ruthless. My

relations toward you, at least, should be able to stand the test of silence. See here, Ivas, where do you suppose Keith Arnold is now?"

So unexpected was this attack that Ivas, for a moment, could not believe that she had heard aright.

"Keith Arnold—why should he be dragged in? I do not know where he is. How should I?"

"My dear, he is here in New York. Under the name of Bryant, Richard Bryant, he holds a long lease on a building that a client of mine wants to buy. Indirectly we tried to buy this Bryant off. He refused. Then I made it my business to go to him, thinking a personal interview might overcome his refusal. Ivas, when I was near enough to the building to see clearly—clearly, mark you—I saw Keith Arnold come out of that building bareheaded with a woman—the woman was Vallé Brooke. He put her in a cab and went back. I further made it my business to go into the building and speak to the elevator man. The fellow was a dumb fool, but I got all that I wanted to know from him. Do you—can you understand? Vallé Brooke is a constant visitor in Arnold's rooms. Do you understand?"

Ivas could not speak. Never in her life had she been so completely confounded, but before she could make any reply a maid spoke from the hall.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Miss Ivas."

"I'll be back in a moment, Father," Ivas said, and

walked stiffly to the little alcove in the hall. It was Brian Brooke.

"Ivas, there was no alternative. They have just taken Vallé to the operating room. Will you tell Aunt Con?"

"Yes." Then: "Brian, you should not be alone. May I come and stay until——"

"No. It's queer, Ivas, but I'd rather be alone until I know."

Ivas hung up the receiver and then took it down and, calling up Miss Moore, delivered the message.

"Do you think I should go, Ivas?"

"No, I think he wants to be alone."

Then Ivas Lee got up and started back to the little library. Her numbed brain seemed suddenly to rush into action. It lighted unsuspected quarters, it tricked doubt and suggested—— Suggested? Of what *was* she thinking? Ivas stood still; she was in front of a long mirror. If Vallé died, Brian must keep her always as he believed her! Brian never could if her father took the obvious way, to him, of curing Brian of his infatuation! She knew how sure and deep her father could cut, if he believed by so doing he could cure. Just how she knew this Ivas never could have told, but she knew! She knew that her father would consider it his duty to tell Brian. His duty! She lifted her eyes and saw her reflection in the mirror. Like a wizard trick her resemblance to Vallé struck her, made

her for a moment sick, dizzy; but it gave her inspiration to act. A moment only of doubt, then her way on seemed brilliantly clear.

"They are operating on Vallé, Father," she said quietly, going into the library and sitting near Lee. Then: "Father, you and I agreed long ago that we'd respect each other's confidences and freedom, didn't we?"

Lee was taken off guard. "Have I failed?" he asked. "Have I presumed upon my relations as your father?"

"No, Father, and that is why I am going to—to prove my appreciation of you now. Father, were you sure that it was Vallé Brooke with Keith Arnold? You saw her distinctly—you would swear to it?"

"What do you mean, Ivas?" Lee leaned forward; his face was hard and his eyes frightened. Yes, frightened. Ivas saw that and it put strength in her. She saw that her father was noting that strange resemblance between her and Vallé.

"Vallé and I, Father, do resemble each other, at a distance—don't we?"

"You!" Lee flinched. The blood that flowed in Vallé Brooke's veins flowed in Ivas's as well, but he had controlled one current! But had he?

"Do you mean to tell me that you, my daughter, could——"

"Yes, Father, I could!" Ivas did not flinch.

"Carry on an intrigue with Keith Arnold?"

"I could, Father." Then: "After all, this is my affair, isn't it? I am rather generous in sharing my confidence, am I not? You see, Keith took another name. It was a chance, but a rather decent one."

"And you, are you as cheap as that, Ivas? You!"

Silence. Then: "Let the matter of the sale, Father, rest for a little while—the office building, you know. I think Richard Bryant will give up his lease if I ask him to."

Lee tried to get up, but felt too weak. "My God!" he muttered. "You cannot know how you've hurt me, Ivas."

"It would have seemed more natural if Vallé had done it? Why, Father? Isn't the tie of blood a queer thing after all?"

"You do not know what you are talking about, Ivas. You! You! Oh, I cannot bear this!"

"Never mind, Father. Until we know about Vallé it seems rather more kindly for us to call a halt, doesn't it?" Pity stirred Ivas's face, and as she looked after her father's retreating form there were tears in her eyes.

"Blood is queer," she thought, "very queer, but there is something stronger, fiercer, than the blood tie. Oh, Brian, Brian—it's all that I can do for you, my dear, my dear."

CHAPTER XII

It was the day before Christmas that Vallé was hurried to the hospital. They placed her in a quiet, ghostly room and a nurse was put in charge. Brian sat close beside the narrow bed wondering vaguely what had so suddenly changed Vallé; changed life. She was wan and so pitifully little, but her eyes were bright and her smile full of courage.

"It's only a scare?" she asked the doctor when he came in.

"We hope so, Mrs. Brooke. You must be very quiet. I see that you are very brave."

In and out the doctor came and went. At noon he urged Brian to go out for a bit of lunch and, walking the streets with the rush of Christmas gayly filling them, Brooke wondered if he ever would feel happy and light-hearted again.

"Things are going fairly well," the doctor tried to reassure him when he went back. "It is one of the strangest cases I have had," he continued. "Why such a healthy, normal young woman should be unable to bear a child, I cannot quite understand."

"You think this may pass?" Brooke's own face was haggard.

"It may."

Then Brian went into the narrow white room and took his place by the narrow white bed.

Vallé opened her eyes. "Safe so far!" she whispered.

A nurse, like a shred of the prevailing whiteness, drew near and took Vallé's wrist in her hand. She was a smiling nurse, not one of adamant. "Fine!" she said, and nodded.

"Vallé, do you suffer?"

"Oh, just a bit now and then. Nothing to fuss so terribly about." Then: "I hear music, Brian. It is beautiful."

"St. Stephen's Church is close by, dear. It's the day before Christmas, you know."

"Of course. Queer, how one forgets. Could you open the window a little, Brian dear?"

"They want you to be quiet, darling."

"I will be quieter than ever if I can hear that organ. It is beautiful."

Brian looked at the nurse and the girl raised the window. Into the room the rich, full organ tones floated and Vallé smiled contentedly.

"They are practising for to-night," the nurse explained; "they have a wonderful choir."

Late that afternoon Vallé, wincing oftener with

pain now, whispered: "If—if this passes, Brian darling, and we have a baby and if it is a little boy, will you let him be called John Stephen? He'd grow up to the name. You've been so utterly kind, Brian dear."

"It shall be called whatever you desire, Vallé my darling. Quiet now."

Again the doctor; always the nurse—the doctor stayed longer at each visit.

"What time is it, Brian?"

"Half-past nine, darling."

"And you've stayed close to me all day—all day."

"I'm going to stay close to you all your life, sweetheart." Brooke spoke almost fiercely.

"Of course you would! You are like a splendid, safe happiness, Brian."

"Dear heart, quiet now."

And then there was a black, blank space when Brooke saw only Vallé's tortured face trying always to smile. And then—an eternity when the narrow bed was empty. They had taken Vallé away! Brooke at that juncture telephoned to Ivas. Ivas seemed the only link between emptiness and the place that had once meant life to him.

Presently—Brooke always shuddered when he recalled how Vallé was returned to that narrow white room—they wheeled her in like a small, still corpse; they lifted her and placed her on the waiting bed.

"She is alive or they would not bring her here."

Something thumped this comfort into Brooke's aching brain.

The window opening to St. Stephen's was still raised. A triumphant chorus was caroling like angels, telling the world that Christ had come, that the world rejoiced, and that it was the Holy Night!

At last Vallé opened her eyes and smiled. Just so had she smiled the night Brooke first saw her—a surprised, glad smile at seeing him there.

"It's wonderful to be out of pain, Brian."

"Do not talk, darling."

"You know?"

"Yes, sweet. I know."

"And oh, Brian, I wanted my baby so much! It was going to make everything worth while."

"Don't, my dear, my dear. You are all that matters—all, all!"

"Just like you to say that!" Vallé closed her eyes; the smile still lay upon her little white face like a beautiful afterglow.

And the music rose and fell rapturously. The nurse came in and out; the doctor came, he reassured Brooke.

"Everything is as right as it can be," he comforted. "You must not worry."

It was just at midnight that Vallé spoke again, her eyes, clear and brave, upon Brian's face: "To others it will not ever mean anything," she whispered, "but

to us, Brian darling, it will mean always a little child, won't it? Something of ours, yours and mine?"

"Yes, Vallé, always."

"John Stephen is too—too big, too real a name. Let us call it Noel, dear—it's a tiny bit of Christmas."

Brooke bent his head over the hands clasped so lightly on Vallé's breast.

"You are not crying, Brian, are you?" Then: "You are—you actually are! You must not, darling boy. I just wanted you to know how I felt. To me the hope will always be a little child, Noel. Yours and mine. Ours."

"And to me, too, Vallé—always."

In two weeks Vallé could be moved home. The whole wretched business seemed unexplainable. She had been so strong and healthy; she recovered so quickly after the unexpected ordeal was passed, that the doctors were more and more puzzled.

And Miss Moore was more and more convinced of what she believed was true, but she kept her opinions to herself and awaited the next shock.

Brian Brooke returned to his business, much as a man does who has passed through an experience that has aged, developed him. Lee was glad to get him back. Under all circumstances Lee clung to anything now that could divert him from his bitter thoughts. He even suggested to Brooke that he might go abroad and look up Crawford.

"Anything the matter with Crawford?" Brooke asked.

"No, he's safe enough."

"Then don't you think we'd better see that deal through for Smith? Have you heard anything from that dog-in-the-manger tenant yet?" The mention of that particular deal acted like poison upon Lee.

"I've about concluded to let it drop," he said.

"That's not like you, Mr. Lee. It's too important a deal to let drop simply because one stubborn idiot holds back. Would you like to have me see him?"

"Good Lord, no! You ought to know by this time, Brooke, that I either go on with what I've undertaken or I drop it for good reasons."

"Excuse me, Mr. Lee, but you did not state any reasons."

"I may later." And day by day Lee waited. When the obstructing tenant let go his grip Lee would understand that Ivas—his Ivas—had used her influence. The thought was wormwood to Lee. His daily contacts with Ivas were growing less rigid, but they were governed by a wholly new relation. Ivas was, apparently, quite her old, cheerful, busy self. That very fact ate into Lee's silent suffering, but he dared not refer to what had caused the strain. That was humiliating. Not to be able to talk openly to his own daughter proved to what extent he had failed!

Ivas realized what her father was enduring, but

she, quite free to speak, did not speak. She had worries of her own and was going slowly, very slowly, thinking long before she took any step. Vallé in the Shadow was one thing; Vallé suddenly more radiant than ever was quite another. The natural revulsion was setting in. There were awful moments when Ivas wondered if she had counted upon Vallé's death.

"I wonder just where Keith Arnold *is?*" she suddenly asked Vallé one day. They were having tea at a small tea room. Ivas was trying desperately to reestablish their old relations.

Vallé actually laughed. "Does it matter?" she asked. "Africa, Timbuktu—which was it?"

"I thought perhaps you or Brian might know." Ivas stirred her tea thoughtfully. Then: "That's an exquisite fur you are wearing, Vallé."

"Yes, a belated Christmas present from Brian. The ridiculous fellow actually made me hang up my stocking three weeks after and he had a little tree." Vallé grew suddenly grave and added, "He put just one darling candle on it. Ivas—you can never tell about men. Some of the most prosaic are the most poetic."

"Are they?" Ivas asked in a flat tone. Then: "One should always take that into consideration, I suppose, when dealing with—men."

"One learns to." After a few moments Vallé asked gently: "Ivas, have you ever been in love, really?"

"Yes." Quite frankly and simply came the word,

and Ivas lifted her eyes to Vallé's face. She was trying to read what really lay behind Vallé's wall of—was it defense?

"When you look like that, Ivas, I can see that we *do* look alike sometimes. Just flashes. I like to look like you, Ivas. Why didn't you marry—why don't you?"

"I suppose I was too much in love to forget."

"He died, Ivas?"

"Ye-es."

At the time it never occurred to Vallé to think of Brian.

"My dear, why haven't you ever told me? I like to feel close to you. And you never speak of him?"

"Rarely. One doesn't, you know; some people don't, I mean."

"I don't know. I think if anything happened to Brian I'd like to talk about him. Not to would be like shutting him away."

"Sometimes, in order to go on living with your chin up, you have to put things and—and people away." Ivas was suffering; doubt was torturing her. Vallé's manner was impossible.

"Ivas, you darling!" Vallé reached across the table and touched Ivas's hand, and Ivas withdrew her hand. The act was involuntary.

It was soon after this talk with Ivas that Vallé spoke to Brian about a home for themselves.

"I cannot explain, Brian," she said. "I have a feeling that if we want to keep everything smooth you and I must have our own place. Since my sickness Aunt Constance seems to have something on her mind—perhaps she'd better keep it there, but I do not like to guess about it. It seems to concern me, somehow. And Mr. Lee—and even Ivas—seem changed."

"Don't get whimsical, darling, but you shall have the best home I can give you. Just say the word. Shall we go hunting to-day?"

"No—and that's another thing. Brian, I want to go to Hedged In."

"But, my dear, the snow's neck high up there. I couldn't consider it for you until spring."

"I know it is neck high, Brian. I can quite realize that. It's awful when the snow covers the windows and smothers you—the light is so gray and ghostly and the terrible quiet. Oh! that winter quiet, when the trails are closed!"

"And you want to go there now, Vallé? How absurd you are." Brooke laughed.

"They'd break through and meet me. That's the wonder of it all. In need, they do break through. Those big, kind lumbermen! They'd go through the worst drifts you ever saw for Father. You do not half know what Father has meant to them—he and Kemel Trench. They've bullied them into keeping partially sober. Father has invested their money. Some

of them don't even realize it, but they own a lot of land up there themselves. Father engineered that. Uncle Steve told me. . . ." Vallé, once started, ran on. "Now that I've been away long enough to get a perspective, Father and all that Hedged In means get thrilling. It's *real,* Brian, real, and things here are not, always."

"Why, Vallé, you are—what are you, homesick?" Brooke drew the girl to him.

"Homesick for what I never had, but cannot get over wanting! Oh, Brian, my own safety and lovely life only make me more keen about Hedged In. I still owe something there though they—my father and Steve—may not realize it. I remember little happenings; even while I felt out of things I saw them, and now I recall them. I still owe a debt and I do not quite know what it is. I do not quite know why Father and Uncle Steve are wonderful, but they are—and so is Kemel Trench. Do you know"—here Vallé smiled—"if Kemel Trench should preach one of his sermons here in New York the papers would be full of it. He should not be buried up there."

"I shouldn't wonder," Brooke laughed too, "but he'd never be asked to preach a second sermon."

"Perhaps one would be enough to make people think. I see Kemel's point now. Churches are not religion, Brian, and that is one thing Aunt Constance has against me. She thinks I'm pagan."

"I agree with her! But see, child, when spring opens up the trails you and I are going for a good long visit to Hedged In."

"Oh, Brian, you are splendid!"

"Write and warn them," Brooke went on. "We can be put up in the wing of the Tavern—the caretaker is there. I'm keen about it myself."

After that talk Vallé seemed to be happier and brighter. In an idle way she looked about for apartments—apartments with at least one large room. She would arrange it like Hedged In. Comfort and space combined. Then it was that she thought, in a definite way, of Keith Arnold again. Her experience had had a most peculiar effect upon her, now that she had had time to consider it. She felt quite removed from so much that had gone into her former days. Former days! That sounded ridiculous. She seemed older and she looked at things as an older woman might. She was more tolerant and at the same time more assured. The life—such a life as Ivas and Miss Moore led—was an empty thing to her. That was why she had taken her own course. Teas and luncheons and dinners and the same people forever! The "worthwhiles," Miss Moore called them. And the awful churches with the strange sermons—how Kemel Trench would laugh and say clever things! And it was so easy in such a life to get twisted as she, Vallé, almost had, about Keith Arnold.

"I wouldn't like little Noel's mother to be *that* sort," she thought one day, and her eyes filled with tears. Vallé wished she could talk about Noel to someone, but no one understood. Even Brian wanted her "to think of other things." Other things! Oh, if only she could make Brian understand how that experience had opened her eyes to the meaning of life in a new way: most of all toward him.

How it was Vallé could never quite recall, but one day she found herself down near Arnold's studio, and, because she was quite, quite beyond any danger now of anything, she walked boldly in, asked if Mr. Bryant was there, and, upon hearing he was, she asked to be taken up. She must have, now she was here, a long, understanding talk with Keith. She knocked with perfect assurance on the green door, and, because Arnold was waiting for a package he had ordered, he called out:

"Come in. Don't keep up that thundering racket. Come in!"

Vallé went in, closed the door and stood with her back against it.

"Well, what in——" Arnold turned. Then he simply stared. "You!" he said presently. "Where have you been?" He looked like a prisoner from whom all news of the outer world had been shut away.

"I've been sick. In a hospital. I've had——"

But Arnold rushed toward her. "Lord! but I am

glad to see you. You look like a little frozen ghost. Here, give me your coat and hat. Cuddle up in that chair—your chair. I'll have beef tea or gin or whatever it is that warms the vitals of pretty little ghosts. Vallé, the play's all but done. I think it is ripping, but I need you and soft music. You'll come with the fiddle, won't you?" Arnold was busily rushing from screen to screen. It made Vallé laugh—it was all so confused and so like Keith, and so jolly. There seemed to have been nothing really jolly for a long time.

"But no play reading to-day, my dear child. I'm going to bring you to and then make you ashamed of your desertion." As a matter of fact, Arnold had, for so long, dwelt in the shadow of what had occurred at Vallé's last visit that now he felt giddy. "Vallé, we'll have one full-dress rehearsal—you and I—and soon. After that I'm returning from Africa. I'm going to give up this old loft—it's served its purpose, and my idiotic shamming about the African desert palls."

"You are coming back?" Vallé sipped the hot, delectable drink that Arnold had prepared. Then: "This isn't any kind of tea, Keith."

"You bet your life it isn't. Drink it, it will put color in your face and the devil in your blood." That Vallé had come back uncalled was going to Arnold's head.

Vallé set the glass down. "I've had enough," she said.

"Forgive me, Vallé, I was joking."

"I'll excuse you. But I've had enough."

Arnold's eyes fell. They talked of the play and of Hedged In; the big, gloomy room was full of drifting shadows and Vallé, like a haunting shadow of a past that Arnold could not fix, rested quietly. Heavens! how calm she was!

"I'm glad you're going to come back," she said at last. "Now tell me the end of the play. How did you handle the girl?"

"I thought I'd leave that to you, Vallé. Such a girl as you would know about might fit in. I've got to get my audience with a true plea and, I own up, girls puzzle me."

"So much depends upon the girl, Keith."

"Of course. Well, I've tried to make her—don't laugh but—like you!"

"I'm sorry, Keith. In the first place you do not know enough about me."

"I wonder."

"I don't—I know. I am just beginning to know some things about myself."

"Perhaps I got there before you!"

"That's nonsense, Keith. Some girls know values—some have to learn."

"Granted, but a play of three acts is not a three-volume novel of life."

"Remember the drop of water and the ocean, Keith!"

Arnold laughed. "You've got, somehow, to give an idea of your girl and then what she does must be consistent. You see, I am still ready to give advice."

"Of course. I want you to."

Vallé ran on: "Some girls just snatch what they fancy; others *know* what they want and need. Your girl must be well balanced."

"Snatchers are rather good sorts." Arnold threw a log on the fire. " 'Live while you live' has something to say for itself. Who knows what comes after?"

"That's just it. If we did know, everything would be comparatively easy."

"Well, Vallé, my girl isn't the cold-blooded, weighed-in-the-balance kind, if that is what you mean. She mustn't ruin my chances of acceptance."

"She need not be a swanker, though."

"A swanker?"

"Yes—paying a silly price for what she may want for the moment. Not knowing the difference between flesh-and-blood and sawdust dolls, and then falling flat."

"Lord! Vallé—your sickness has done something to you."

"It always does, doesn't it?"

"Well, anyway, you will come to my dress rehearsal, won't you, dear girl? We'll have a farewell dinner

here. Will you? And then when I get back from Africa we'll always wink at each other and have our private joke. On the first night, Vallé, you shall have a box, and if you do not clap you'll break my heart. Come, let me get you into your coat. I see you are restless."

There was a moment when Vallé wondered if she were to feel his lips again. Something in her waited.

Keith only laughed and gave her a little push. That pause of hers angered him, made him defiant.

"Stairs or elevator, Vallé?" Arnold's eyes were fun-filled, but rebellious.

"The ele——? No! the stairs."

"Stairs it shall be and *I* go with the stairs. Down we go together."

"All right—together!"

They stood in the early twilight on the sidewalk, waiting for a cab.

And there, after many, many silent watches, Ivas Lee saw them! Her face hardened. She drew nearer, keeping close to the building. The still twilight carried the sound of their voices to her.

"You will send me word, *when?*"

"Yes, Keith. Good-bye."

Ivas stood still.

"It must *not* happen!" Something in her registered. "She must not come here again. She shall not!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE silent winter woods surrounded Hedged In, making it a besieged fort. Storms beat upon it and the trails were clogged. The three lonely men held the place doggedly and with curious courage. There was a good deal of music when the danger of revolt stressed; a good deal of eating and more drinking than was wise.

Because he was near the outer edge of endurance, John Tremaine was a little more careful with his attire than he ordinarily was, and Stephen was more furtive and watchful. Stephen knew all the danger signs and Kemel Trench was learning them; they were watching Tremaine.

There was one narrow trail kept partially cleared. It led from Hedged In to the post office, and from there several more or less cleared trails led to the camps. What was going on there Trench hardly dared think about and he dared not leave Hedged In. He simply could not go to the camps and stay; a brief call now and then would be useless. There was much

drinking going on, he knew, and someone had told him that strange women had been seen in the woods. Half-breeds, several of them were.

"Good God!" muttered Trench, but with a definite duty at close quarters he dared not go afield. The Tremaines needed him. Trench had no choice.

The atmosphere of Hedged In was electric. John's fiery outbursts—so different from his courteous, off-hand manner—were ominous, and Stephen looked afraid; almost, he slunk to his tasks. It was difficult to judge or act intelligently when one's friendship was based upon really nothing but daily contact. Still Trench stayed at his post. He occupied Vallé's room and from it he could often hear what he wished he might not hear: John Tremaine's taunts and Stephen's dumb sighs of utter exasperation.

"Money or no money, Steve, you were an ass to hold me back. We should have gone." The words sunk into Trench's brain.

No reply from Stephen.

"And you know as well as I do that there's going to be a blow from some quarter."

"Oh, John, for heaven's sake! It's not like you to fear." This seemed wrung from Stephen at last.

"Fear! Fear! This isn't fear, it's intuition."

"All right. Good-night."

John Tremaine read Vallé's letters and interpreted them by his quickened imagination and an old, old

understanding. Barnard Lee's hate of Vallé; "his strange manner," as Vallé wrote, "ever since the night he saw me in the silver dress and kissed my hand, has never changed. Sometimes he frightens me."

"Silver dress!" muttered Tremaine. "Why mention silver dress?" But suddenly Tremaine remembered a woman who once wore a silver dress. Lord! Vallé would be like her in a silver dress. "God! No wonder Lee kissed her hand. He would, since he could not throttle her. No wonder, since, that his hate has flamed."

Tremaine gave an unholy laugh. Trench, practising on his flute, looked sternly at him.

"Something funny?" he asked.

"No—damned tragic."

In a clairvoyant sense, John Tremaine knew things. He followed Vallé through that winter with strange accuracy. He *knew* what Lee was up to! Lee was not very imaginative or facile. If he found a thing worked once he would utilize it again. If Vallé were imprudent or, in her ignorance, went a bit off the beaten course, Lee would drive her out on some pretext—but out! She had got in; something stronger than Lee had managed that—but all the more reason for triumphing in the end and crushing her out.

Vallé's illness and its cause seemed to have a strange effect upon Tremaine; upon Stephen, too, for that matter.

"Like an inherited curse," John muttered. But neither spoke of this to Trench.

And then one day John Tremaine left Hedged In without explanation and for days he remained away. Stephen grew gray and thin and Trench was torn between a desire to go to the camp and a desire to remain with Stephen. He felt sure Tremaine was at the camps. What was he doing in those little, detached hells?

"Shall I go or stay, Steve?" he asked at last.

"Stay here."

"Very well—now let's tune up."

Three days passed, then four, and five. Another snowstorm came silently down like a white pall. Stephen looked positively ill and spoke more freely to Trench than was his wont.

"In some moods John would go to any lengths," he confided, working away at the steam on the windows. Previously he had shoveled the snow from the outside and he was weary beyond words, but he wanted the light to shine through the windows.

"You want me to go, Steven? I mean—away from you and your brother?"

"No. If nothing is wrong he would resent it; if it is, we'll know when the thaw sets in. You—must not—leave me."

"It never seemed to me that you and your brother cared so deeply for Vallé that her absence should

upset you so. Her being always away so much should have prepared you." Trench ventured this at a risk.

Stephen raised his troubled eyes and for an instant Trench realized that he had never known the real Stephen Tremaine; known him as he might be with John's compelling presence removed. Stephen now looked pitiful, like a punished creature that for a moment glimpsed the nearness of comfort and yearned toward it.

"It isn't Vallé. It's what she stands for, Trench. Much of the—the past is wrapped about what Vallé stands for. Happiness and the cursed suffering. You don't—you cannot—love the thing that forces you to remember." This was going far.

"Never mind, old man, don't tell me anything you may be sorry for afterward. I'm no believer in the confessional except as a last resource. How about the Fifth Symphony?" Trench turned away from Tremaine's hungry eyes.

Stephen went to bed on the sixth night. He was so exhausted that Trench had insisted, but Trench himself was sitting by the fire and piling on wood with recklessness. There was no sound outside, and until the door opened Trench did not suspect anyone was near.

"Hello, Trench!" John Tremaine came in, closed the door, shook the snow from his clothing, and hung up his coat and hat. Then he sat down. He looked

old, tired, and yet, in a way, radiant. He had the appearance of a tired athlete who had come in first.

Trench merely said: "Glad you're back, Tremaine. Steve's gone to bed."

The mention of Stephen's name seemed to be the key that opened the door of Tremaine's pent-up thoughts.

"See here, Trench, I'm going to talk to you; going to make things clear for Steve's sake. All reason for secrecy is over."

Trench did not push confession aside now; he understood the stark need of it at the present moment.

"There are limits, Trench, to endurance of any kind. Fate can make one suffer overmuch until one turns on Fate. I've turned. I'm sorry about Steve. He'll get a bad setback but he'll have you and a chance that he couldn't have with me. He'll see that some time. You'll convince him—you and that God of yours."

"Are you drunk, Tremaine?" Trench wanted to make sure.

"I was for twenty-four hours. I'm all right now."

"Go on then."

"I'd like a drink now," Tremaine said. "I've had a long pull. I can carry it all right."

Trench got up, found a bottle and poured carefully a safe drink.

"Thanks, Trench. Considering your training, you're about the most surprising man I've ever known."

"Where have you been, Tremaine?"

"Over to the camps—it was pay day, you know—then to the bank at Overcrest with the money I forced those devils to give me. The money is in the bank, Trench. It's safe enough, for the present." Tremaine drained his glass. "Another?" he asked whimsically.

"No. Go on, Tremaine."

"Trench, were you ever afraid?"

"Yes, a good many times."

"Of yourself?"

"Usually of myself. Go on, Tremaine."

"What do you do when you're afraid of yourself, Trench?"

"As soon as my fool senses come to, I tackle the thing that scared me—the coward in me turns tail, on being attacked."

"That's damned rot, Trench. If a thing doesn't slink off with its tail between its legs after over twenty years you can bet your eternal soul that it isn't going to slink—it's going to spring."

"And I tell you, Tremaine, that's rot. It's coward talk."

"What's that?"

"I said it was coward talk."

"Take that back, Trench."

"I will if I'm convinced that I'm wrong. Not until."

"That means I'll have to convince you? I might knock you down instead."

"You won't, Tremaine. You'll not convince me that you are a coward, either."

Tremaine was driven hard. He was bodily spent and spiritually all but worsted. Trench seemed impersonal. Like a doctor or—a minister. Neither physician nor priest would divulge anything, so Tremaine's tired brain argued as he looked haggardly into the roaring fire. He had gone the gamut since leaving Hedged In. Drink, women, the sudden chance of mastership, and his regained control of the men! With their money, while on the way to the town where the bank was, temptation—gaunt and luring—overtook him. He had ways of getting considerable money—the money of others. He had the power of attorney. He'd secured that. After all the years he might be free at last. Free! There had been an hour in the bleak woods, before he reached the shabby town, when Tremaine had known happiness. Delirious happiness, to be sure—but happiness, nevertheless. He seemed to have cast aside shackles and accepted the only way after the long, long years!

Trench was watching the grim face turned partially from him.

Without looking around, Tremaine said presently in a dull monotone:

"There was a big spree, Trench. The men and women were devils."

"I can imagine it."

"I almost fell for one hussy, Trench." A troubled laugh broke the even tone.

"But you didn't, Tremaine. Just hold to that. It isn't the thing that tempts us that matters, but the power in us to resist."

"Don't preach a damned sermon to me, Trench."

"No, but I'll tell you some God truths if I see my way."

A pause, then a suggestion of break marked Tremaine's voice. "I have those rough chaps in the hollow of my hands, Trench. Why, if I had not come to when I did the mounted police couldn't have stopped the hell—and where would the money have been then?"

"Well, the police weren't needed, Tremaine, just hold to that, too; and the money is safe in the bank and the men can still trust you, depend upon you, can't they?"

"The money seemed like mine. In a way it is—at least I could engineer it and be free! I could make a small fortune, Trench, on the market now. I could pay back, once I was free."

"Would you be free, Tremaine?" Trench's face was calm. The calmness angered Tremaine.

"Damn it all—yes!" he flung out.

So it was money *and* a woman long ago, Trench quickly and rightly concluded. "And where would you go when you were free—dragging your ball and chain?"

"What's that, Trench?"

Trench repeated his question.

"There's the world." Tremaine bowed his head on his breast.

"A small place for a man dragging a ball and with the smell of—of a crime on him."

Tremaine made no reply. After a moment Trench went on:

"No, it won't do, Tremaine. You couldn't do this any more than you could take one of those women. The good in you will always save you—it has brought you to this to prove it to you. I don't ask for your past, Tremaine, but I do ask to share your future. We've been friends. Let us remain so. You and Steve are lonely men and so am I—a lonely man. You are going to stay right here and put through that deal with the market, if you can, and your chain then will be broken forever. You're going to leave it all here when spring comes, and the three of us, you, Steve, and I, are going to light out. We've done our stunt here."

Tremaine drew a long breath as if coming out of a bad dream. "When Vallé went away my income ceased, Trench," he muttered.

So that was it! Trench saw a little further. Vallé was mixed up in it. That accounted for the Tremaines' attitude toward her; to a certain extent, anyway.

"I have my money, Tremaine. You've been a wise adviser—I've followed your advice all these years. I have money enough to take us far enough away to start afresh. It's a regular income now and will be while I live. I've saved from it. I have you to thank for that."

"And you ask me and Steve to share it, Trench?"

"I plead with you to share it, Tremaine. And there's Steve's music. He's a genius but he's cowed and frightened—that will right itself in time."

"And, good God! Trench, the Church had no place for such as *you!*"

Tremaine gave an hysterical laugh. Trench frowned, but made no answer. After a moment he took up his old theme.

"I don't care whether you ever tell me anything more or not, Tremaine. I have enough to go on. Whatever force sent you into exile and has kept you here has failed of its purpose. Something bigger than hate or revenge——"

"Justice, Trench, justice!"

"Well, man's damned justice then. It has failed. You are a better and stronger man than when you came here. You've suffered too much, overpaid your

debt. When you shake all this off you will understand and laugh at it."

"Laugh?" Tremaine stared and then laughed sardonically. His experience had taken a good deal out of him.

Presently he got up and went over to a rough desk in the corner, unlocked it and took out a letter.

"I want you to keep this letter, Trench. Steve knows all about it, though he's never read it. If anything should ever happen to me I want you to send it—or give it—to Vallé."

"All right, Tremaine."

"Trench, sit down. Let's make a night of it. I'm going to tell you something more."

Trench did not refuse to listen as earlier he had refused Stephen's near-confession. "All right, Tremaine, we'll mend the fire. There's a big storm coming on. It's coming noiselessly, like a thief in the night. By morning——"

"See here, Trench. I came near pulling off a tremendous deal once—more for the glory of the thing than anything else. You believe that?"

"Yes, certainly."

"I thought I couldn't fail. It was big enough to involve a good many people. It did fail, and things looked black as hell. A man, my *brother,* who had never trusted me and who, in a way, was right about me, held the pack at bay and saved me from prison.

He at least patched up the family honor and made his terms. Even then, Trench, I begged for a chance among men, a chance to get back. He would not, could not, see it my way. Under all circumstances, *all,* Trench, I felt that my sinking out of sight was my one and only way of showing gratitude—yes, gratitude to him."

Trench nodded his head.

"My brother's wife," Tremaine went on, "loved me. I loved her. Again that damned something in me, that holds me back at the finish, held me back then. It didn't seem decent. She saw that, too. My brother, for all his honor and clean life, had a blind spot—no imagination. Things were, or were not, with him. He believed the worst when any suggestion of wrong was evident. He was hard, Trench, hard and deep. I've always had a kind of pity for him—and respect, too, of a sort. When I turned my back on life, Trench, I *turned* it. You've got to fasten to that. I had no backward look. I took what was offered me, like a beaten dog. Steve came with me, from choice. To a sensitive creature like Steve—well, you see what it has done for him. He's a good cook!"

"He's a genius, Tremaine. You cannot kill genius—you'll see!"

"My brother's wife would have followed me, Trench. I often wonder what I would have done had she come to me, but just then she knew that she was

to have another child. There was one already. Trench, look at me."

Both men faced each other while the thudding of heavy wet snow was heard against the bare windows.

"Trench, the second child, as well as the first, was my brother's! Get that?"

"I get it, Tremaine. As God hears us, I get it."

"All right. Then you can understand that my brother's wife dared not confess to my brother at that time. She knew him; I knew him. She went away. She hoped the child would never be born. She tried, I am afraid, to prevent its birth. Then she repented and went through with it alone, in a poor place in France. She knew at last that she wasn't going to live. She wrote two letters—the one you have, in case of her death to be given to me and kept for her child; another telling me where she was, and how. The latter she posted; the other was found among her things. Steve went. I dared not. He was with her when she died. He made arrangements for the child. Trench, Vallé is the child!"

Trench drew a deep breath. He felt as if he had worked his way from under a load of damp, heavy snow that had all but smothered him.

"And you, Tremaine," he said hoarsely. "You have protected—saved for your brother's child!"

"I could not love her, Trench, that has been the

curse. Because she wasn't mine, I could not love her. Because she cost the life she did, I could not."

"And yet you have done what you have!" Trench got to his feet. He leaned against the rough stones of the chimney. He stared at Tremaine as if he had never seen him before. Then he slowly put out his hand.

"Will you shake hands with me, Tremaine?" he said, and choked.

Their hands met.

" 'And every man shall pitch by his own standard,' " Trench quoted slowly, as if the words were being forced out of his mouth. Then:

"You must sleep, Tremaine. You will, now. Good-night."

CHAPTER XIV

Ivas Lee was treading warily a path not only unfamiliar, but distasteful to her. She knew black doubts concerning Vallé—doubts that she dared not form into words. Simple and frank by nature, her life had been made easy for her to live. Until she had failed to win Brian Brooke's love, she had gone triumphantly forward, assured and happy. She had never doubted herself, but, once being compelled to doubt, something rather unlooked for developed in the girl. She did not intend to let another fail where she had failed! She had a strong affection for Brooke—more affection than passion, had she but understood it. She wanted him to be happy and successful. She had felt a real personal achievement when her father had selected Brooke and advanced him rapidly. She now regarded Vallé as the only one who could make Brian happy, secure to him the success he had so rightly won. Unworthy as Vallé was—and this doubt had become almost a conviction after seeing Vallé with Arnold—Ivas still clung to her determination to protect Brooke.

To Ivas, Vallé's worthlessness was viewed through modern lenses. Miss Moore would have been sick with horror could she have known the workings of Ivas's mind now. Vallé—erring, or whatever one might term it—was still charming and she held a marvelous power over Brooke. "Such women often do," thought poor Ivas, and her modernity did not spare her the age-old resentment. "However, things are *as* they are and Brian shall not go down in the ruins."

It did not really matter what her father thought of her. Ivas knew that that could be righted later on. She had taken her position between Vallé and a bad alternative and she meant to see the thing through. She haunted the neighborhood of Arnold's studio; she even took a room in a near-by apartment and caused her father untold anguish by her absences. She saw Arnold pass in and out in his absurd disguises. Her contempt for him was touched by amusement. Since that night when she had overheard Vallé's promise to return to the studio, Ivas had rarely deserted her post.

And with all this undercurrent going on, the surface of the waters, naturally, was troubled. Miss Moore, in her heart a potential murderer, so she feared, looked upon Vallé's recovery with dismay. Had Vallé died, reconstruction might again have given Constance Moore a life work, but alive and well and lovelier than ever, Vallé made reconstruction a

farce. The girl's gayety was almost insulting and rarely did Ivas come to the house now.

Brian Brooke felt the change in temperature and, manlike, deplored the ways of women—ways that no man could comprehend. He even criticized Vallé, now and then.

"She's older than we, dear," he pleaded; "humor her." He referred to Miss Moore, whose grim silences appalled him.

"Humor her?" Vallé asked. "In what, Brian? You might as well talk about humoring an iceberg. Why, she resents my having lost my baby, Brian. I know she does."

"But that's nonsense, child. You are edgy."

Vallé, not as strong as she seemed, began to brood a little, and when Brian attended more strictly to business she brooded a little more and could not laugh herself out of her moods. She wrote oftener to Hedged In. Somehow it seemed a safe vent and her letters were woefully transparent. She began to think oftener, too, of Keith Arnold and the fascination of his studio; the charm of his manner; his play; her sustaining belief that she had helped him.

"It *is* good and I know it," she thought on, "and he believes in me. Why doesn't he write and fix a date for the reading, and the last supper?"

Vallé, at this point, drew herself up sharply. She and Arnold had managed, somehow, to leap over

rather a threatening chasm—at least, *perhaps* it was a chasm to Arnold. She felt *she* had always been safe enough, though to prove that to Arnold would be brutal. Perhaps, after all, it was no chasm for anyone—just a bump in the road! And still Arnold remained silent in that lair of his.

At last Vallé wrote to him—wrote to "Richard Bryant."

"Brian is going away again on business. That last supper must come off now, or never, for soon we, Brian and I, are going to my old home, and before we get back you will have returned to civilization, bringing your sheaves with you."

Vallé was rather proud of that letter. It was a masterpiece in its relation to possible chasms!

Keith Arnold grinned over that letter, and the postscript: "I'll bring the orchestra and help along the action of the play." The date was set. "If this suits you." Arnold was amused, and something more. He grew serious presently. Things did not mean to him what they always had to Brooke. Kissing a pretty woman was an old pastime of Arnold's, but he respected Brooke's limitations and Vallé was Brooke's wife—not just a woman! Then, too, Vallé was getting under the skin with Arnold. He acknowledged this. When that occurred he always brought himself to a full stop while he considered. He knew himself perfectly, and his code was distinct—though elastic.

Vallé's claim, as well as Brooke's, must be respected and protected even from Arnold himself.

Still, Arnold wrote, accepting Vallé's date.

Ivas was alert all this time—most alert when she was occupying her rented room. How she was in the future to hate that room! She went one Friday to the neighborhood of Arnold's studio. She saw Arnold come out at six and take a taxi. She took another. She followed Arnold to his aunt's house. He had a briefcase under his arm. The evening was safe, so Ivas thought, and went, like a despised spy, to her father's home.

Arnold was going to read his play to Miss Arnold. He was to have a remarkable night. They chuckled over his sudden return from exile and Ivas was quite safe in her conclusions.

At midnight Arnold asked: "Mary Jane, how am I to end the blessed thing?" Miss Arnold had listened in silence.

"I'll have to think that over, my dear." Miss Arnold was thrilled with pride. "You've accomplished something, Keith, but the end must justify it. I must—think."

The Saturday following that Friday, Lee and Brooke started away on business and Ivas, aching from nervousness, felt convinced that now her hour was come! She wondered if ever again she would feel respect for herself. In a way she felt unclean, unwor-

thy of the high task by which she was proving her devotion to Brooke. "He'd loathe me most of all," she felt, "but he must never know." That was the cruel part. Success meant her own desert stretching on forever. "If only Vallé were worth it." Ivas bowed her head at this and took a taxi to that rented room of hers.

It was storming—another of those wet snowstorms when the streets were slush and the taxis seemed incapable of supplying the demand. Ivas watched from her window. If Vallé went to the studio she meant to head her off. If Keith Arnold became involved he must bear his part. Ivas devoutly hoped that Arnold might *not* become involved but that chance must be run.

At last Ivas could bear detachment no longer. She felt sure Vallé would come so she went to the office building; she cunningly watched her opportunity and climbed the stairs to Arnold's floor. Once she reached that she waited in the dim corner of the hall. That was a safer position, and if Vallé did not come Ivas knew she could watch her opportunity and steal down later. It being Saturday and stormy, the few tenants were leaving early; she was safe enough but horribly uncomfortable.

On the top floor all was silent. Ivas listened at the green door and at the three other dull-brown ones. Not a sound! Fortunately the hall was not cold and

it was dark, or only dimly lighted. There was a box in the corner—the darkest corner, and near Arnold's door. Ivas sat down. Now that she had come to the hour of her trial she was quite calm and desperately prepared to go to the extreme limit with Vallé. She would not withhold, even herself, if by so doing she could win her suit; and no doubt now entered in of Vallé's coming.

Things played into Ivas's hands. At six-thirty the nerve-racking elevator came up. Vallé was the only passenger and the old man at the wheel was talking wheezily. "Mr. Bryant, ma'am, said as how you was to go right in. He said as how you would understand. He'll be back not later than eight, or a bit after, if the storm holds him up."

"Thanks. Yes, I understand."

Vallé bent to unlock the door—the man had handed her the key. The door swayed in and at that instant Ivas darted in after Vallé. In the dim light of the studio Vallé could not at once recognize Ivas and she was frightened.

"Who—what——" she gasped.

"Where's the electric switch?" Ivas asked.

"Here!" Vallé turned the light on. Then: "Ivas—what is the matter? You—you should not have done this. How did you know that I would be here? Or——" But that was ridiculous. Arnold would never

have invited Ivas. There was something disarming in Vallé's voice and manner. She was frightened, but not guiltily overcome. The difference was apparent even to Ivas's strained senses.

"Father found out about your coming here. I lied to him, Vallé. I told him that it was I—we are enough alike at a distance——" Words ran over one another like senseless patter.

"You told him that *you* came here? Why, Ivas? Why?" Vallé was blankly staring.

"Can't you see, Vallé? I had to. Father believed the worst."

"The worst?" Vallé walked slowly across the room and placed her violin on a table. "Let us sit down by the fire," she said quietly, "and take off our coats and hats." She tossed her own aside, but Ivas, standing by the chimney, kept hers on. She dared not sit down. Only by rigid holding to duty could she hope for success.

"Vallé, you must come away before Keith Arnold returns."

"*You* must, Ivas. He would be angry and terribly upset to find you here. I have an appointment with him."

"Vallé, are you acting?"

"Acting? Why should I?"

"Then you must be an utter idiot." Ivas was losing

her self-control. "In either case you must come with me before Keith Arnold returns, and you must never come here again. Never!"

Vallé's eyes widened, darkened, and her head lifted.

"Since it is you, Ivas," she said slowly, "I cannot resent this as I might, but now let us understand each other. What right have you, and what reason have you, for following me here?"

Ivas braced against the bricks of the chimney. This was worse than she had anticipated. Things had taken an ugly turn. "I have told you. Father saw you and Keith together here. He believed the worst. He would have told Brian—— Oh, Vallé, you must see, you must!"

"I'm beginning to see—yes. The worst would be—— What would the worst be to your father, Ivas—I mean exactly?"

"He would think"—Ivas gave neither herself nor Vallé quarter now—"that you had accepted Keith as a lover, that you came here secretly, that your recent sickness——"

"And you told him that it was you who came? Ivas, how did he take that?"

"Can you not imagine, Vallé?"

Vallé's face hardened. Lee's manner to her, his senseless dislike, added fuel to her growing indignation. Barnard Lee's worst would be very bad indeed.

"Ivas," she asked slowly, "why did you do this for

me? The taking upon yourself of what your father believes—this *worst* of his!"

Ivas did not flinch even now. She knew she must go to the last trench—and she went! "Vallé, let us be fair. Certainly you must know that for you to come here alone, secretly, can only be construed——" Ivas halted before the last line.

"You are not answering my question, Ivas. Granting the—the construction—why did you do this for me?" There was iron in Vallé now and it struck upon Ivas's steel with cruel strength.

"I did not do it for you, Vallé." Honesty came to Ivas's desperate need.

"For whom, then?"

"For Brian, for all that Brian stands for."

"What does he stand for?"

"Vallé——" Ivas was growing reckless and she was becoming more and more angry. Time was passing. A clock somewhere struck seven. "I told you once that I had loved a man. You thought the man had died. He did not die!"

"You loved, you still love, Brian?" Vallé leaned forward. "And you were willing to—to do what you have done because you love Brian? I cannot quite see."

"I said *for* Brian and for what Brian stands for!" Ivas's face was white and set.

"And what is it, exactly, that he stands for?"

still away somewhere at her bridge—her everlasting bridge. "I wonder if she will be surprised to find me home?" The thought ran vaguely through Vallé's mind. "I wonder if they all think the worst? How much do they suspect? Would Brian, if he knew, think the worst?" That brought Vallé to a starting point. She made herself comfortable before the little fireplace after lighting the kindlings.

She began with Brian. She would have to end with Brian, too. She realized that. He was all that really mattered. She loved Brian. She could do for him as much as Ivas could. Yes, she was sure she could. She would leave him free—as he had always said he would leave her—to think things out. It seemed marvelous that so quick a way had been opened for her to leave them *all* time to think things out—she as well as others. Vallé's vision widened.

Keith Arnold would explain to Brian, now the play was finished; the studio was soon to be closed. Keith would wonder at her broken engagement but later, when he heard of her father's illness, he would understand, and perhaps then, with need for secrecy gone, he would quite easily tell Brian about the meetings in the studio. That would clear things a little when Ivas talked to Brian—for Ivas *must* talk, must set everything before Brian, must leave a clean and clear space for everyone to think. That was only right and decent;

the only way to begin all over with hope of happiness in the end for—somebody.

Happiness! And then Vallé thought of her father. He was desperately ill, she knew, or Kemel would never have sent for her. Vallé began to pack a small bag—it must not be heavy; she was not strong enough to carry a heavy bag.

It was at this point that Vallé dropped into a chair and cried wretchedly. After a few minutes she went on with her packing. There was still the note to leave for Brian. Just a simple note; nothing must be complicated.

It was while Vallé was writing the note that she heard Miss Moore come in and pause at the foot of the stairs.

"I'm here, Aunt Constance."

Was Miss Moore relieved? She merely said, "Of course. You're up late, aren't you? Good-night. It's quite awful out of doors."

"BRIAN DEAR, Father is very ill. I have gone to him. Kemel is to meet me. And, dear, if I *want* you, need you, I will let you know. Unless I do you must not come. And Ivas has something to talk over with you."

Almost Vallé had written Arnold's name. But her promise to guard his hiding place still held. After the talk with Ivas, Brian would probably go to Arnold. Well! that could not be helped. Things were terribly bungled, but the play was finished!

After the packing and the note, Vallé tried to sleep. She did, off and on. At six o'clock she was up and dressing. She would get to Albany and take the first train out. She noiselessly went downstairs and left the note on the hall table.

CHAPTER XV

As VALLÉ left the city behind her she was more and more surprised to find how the ease and luxury of her recent life had clutched her. The months—why, they seemed like years!—had softened and weakened her. She felt the cold, the lack of little comforts, and as the train rushed through the villages the snow-clogged roads appalled her. The city streets were bare! To be sure, it was late February, snow was natural enough, but what would Hedged In be like? It was accessible or Kemel Trench would not have written for her to come.

She had to wait until late afternoon in Albany. The train on the branch road was slow in starting out and when it did start it did so most reluctantly and hesitated all the way to the lake.

Trench was there to meet the train! Vallé saw him at once in his fur coat and moth-eaten fur cap drawn down close over his thin, handsome face. The lake was frozen and a rough sled, heaped with robes, stood close by the train platform.

"Oh, Kemel!" Vallé dropped her bag and stretched out her hands. "Oh! it is good to see you."

Trench looked at the girl sharply. "You're thin and pale," he said quietly. "Come. There'll be time for talk as we go." He tucked her in among the robes, jumped in himself, and started the husky team.

"The horses, Kemel—where did they come from?"

"The camps. The men cannot do enough."

"And Father?" Vallé faltered at the question.

"About the same."

Vallé dared not ask, "The same as what?" Instead, she said: "He knows I am coming?"

"Yes, your letters worried him."

"Why, Kemel, why should they? They were happy letters. I—I was careful about that."

Trench eyed her quickly and then turned away. "Your—your father has grown infernally keen," was all he said.

"Well, Kemel, I'll tell you this. I was starved. All my life I had been starved and when I got the chance I was greedy, I suppose. I ate too much and too—too fast. Perhaps I took some of what belonged to others. I began to see that—and then things happened."

There were tears in Vallé's eyes. Trench knew there were, so he did not turn as he said: "If you did, I bet you gave back all that did not rightfully belong to you."

"That's kind of you to say that, Kemel. I tried, but

one cannot always do that, you know. Things can be ruined."

Silence, while the runners crunched over the hard, dry snow.

"Kemel, I was going to have a baby."

"So that was it. Your—your father knew it, I think."

"How?"

"Just knew. He's keener than he used to be about you."

"I shall always think of my baby as a baby, Kemel. I called it Noel." It was wonderful to talk right out at last.

"Some women are like that!" Trench spoke softly as if trying to prove a point against an antagonist. Then: "You'll find your father changed, Vallé. Be prepared. A time back he saw a chance to save the men over at the camps. Some invisible and dangerous devil was trying to do the men out of what was rightfully theirs. Lumber property that for years they had, with your father's engineering, bought, little by little. This scamp, under cover and never suspecting a head like your father's in the woods here, had all but succeeded when your father took the bit in his teeth—and Lord! how he hewed everything down before him. It meant trips through the worst spell of weather we've had in years. Nothing could stop him. He brought that skunk into the open. They had it out over at the county seat. Your father came back

triumphant, but all in. Pneumonia followed. Steve traveled all night to get a doctor—on foot, too. Since then the men at camp have done all the jobs and a dozen horses are at our command—and a dozen men, too."

"Oh, Kemel!" Something gripped Vallé's throat like a tangible force.

The woods were dark and heavy with snow. They had left the lake and had struck onto the rough lumber trail. The cold was sickening in its intensity, and the creaking and grinding of the snow as the sled cut like a knife into its crust were like protests from something that had feeling and resistance.

"And it was only as long ago as September that I was here, Kemel."

"One can pack a lot of life into five months, Vallé."

"Yes, one can, Kemel."

The cold was getting through the heavy robes. A deadly nausea was creeping into Vallé's suffering, so she did not talk any more but edged closer to Trench and leaned her face against his rough coat.

And so they came to Hedged In. The lights from the tall, bare windows glowed like ruddy beacons; a roaring fire sent smoke high into the clear air. Stephen was awaiting them. He opened the door as the sled drew up and they all went in. A man had suddenly emerged and taken the horses.

"One of the loggers," Trench explained.

Inside the large room Vallé stood and tried to get her bearings. Her eyes ached with the cold; her body seemed dead. A table spread for supper stood by the fire—that end of the room was warm, the rest had the chill of the deadly cold in it.

"Steve—Uncle Steve—aren't you glad I'm here?" It stung Vallé more sharply than the cold to see the poor shrunken form of Stephen Tremaine stand apart as if it had no claim upon anything.

Vallé dropped her heavy wrappings and went over to him. She bent and kissed him. "Oh, Steve!" was all she said. The old agony of trying to claim something, wring something from life, was upon her again. Then, too, a sudden horror added to the sensation of aloofness—she was accepting it as natural! The recent glow and joy seemed utterly gone; it was as if they had never existed as *hers*. She had come back to what really she had a right to, though no part in. She shuddered.

"You're cold." Stephen looked up. His dark, wonderful eyes held an expression Vallé had never seen in them before. She had seen the same look in the eyes of animals—the soul striving for expression. "Come—we'll eat and get warm," he said.

"But—Father!"

"He's sleeping." Stephen moved away toward the kitchen.

At intervals Trench rose and laid on logs. Outside someone was bringing more wood to the house.

"Men from the camp are here all the time," Stephen explained. "They bunk in the kitchen."

Kemel gave one of his rare smiles.

It was ten and after when John Tremaine opened his eyes and looked at Vallé sitting close by his bed. The bare room was heated by a clean little fire on the hearth; the light of the blaze drifted across Tremaine's gaunt face.

"So!" he murmured.

"Yes, Father."

Tremaine winced at that. Then:

"You've come back. Well, I felt you would, even though there was risk. You've been sick?"

"Yes, Father."

"You were—disappointed?"

"Yes, dreadfully."

"That is better than—well, than if you were not disappointed."

A pause and Tremaine's heavy breathing filled the quiet room.

"They insist upon it, Vallé, that I am sick. I am not —that's past. I'm only infernally tired. Did they tell you about the lumber business?"

"Yes, Father."

"There's nothing that tires you more, nothing that makes one so glad to be tired, than a good fight brought well to a successful finish." Tremaine gave a rattling laugh and closed his eyes. "Trench would put

it another way"—the eyes did not open. " 'Fought the good fight' . . . I must get Trench to say that over."

"You'd better not talk any more, Father. They have brought a cot in. I am going to stay close by."

"That's great. I like to talk in snatches—do you mind?"

"No—I love it."

"You're thin, Vallé."

"I've lost a little—a little flesh, Father."

"You fought a good fight, child?"

"No, Father—a very poor one."

Tremaine laughed his rattling laugh. It was a loose sound, like something that had broken away and was easily moved.

In short naps Vallé slept and so did Tremaine. At intervals Stephen or Trench came up and replenished the fire, and twice Tremaine was given medicine.

Morning came into the woods ruddily, the snow was transformed and the trees made long, black shadows. The dull life of the place began: cooking, eating, the everlasting carrying in of wood. A continual fight against the cold that crept close and pressed hard against the house, ready to spring in at every opening of the doors and slink into corners or as near the fire as it could.

That other life of gayety and warmth and love seemed to Vallé to be a dream that had passed, and yet in her loneliness and suffering she yearned for

Brooke dumbly and brokenly as a child does who has worn itself out craving a precious thing that has been taken ruthlessly from him. Still, over and over, came the thought that what was really hers would remain. Someone had said that beautifully once. What was really her own was safe. She would go back to it—it must not come here. And then Vallé discovered that, unknowingly, she was planning, thinking ahead. She knew that her father was dying—how she knew it she could not tell, but she did. She knew that after he was gone Stephen and she and Trench would have to face a change. There must be a change. Life had taught Vallé one tremendous fact. No matter what was behind the closed door of the Tremaines' life, it would be done to death by John Tremaine's death. After that, somehow, somewhere, that hunted look in Stephen's eyes must be driven out. His music must count and help to save him. This was the thing she must do; the debt she must pay!

"Oh! I wish I *knew,*" Vallé thought. "I could act more intelligently. I want to know for Uncle Steve's sake."

On the third day Vallé was sitting by John Tremaine's bed, gazing upon his thin, fine face. What a face it was to be found in the black winter woods! Then, like a vision, it seemed no longer John Tremaine's face, but Barnard Lee's. The resemblance startled Vallé. She bent closer—she began to feel and

feel and suffer as she had not before. In her misery she was conscious of being glad to suffer; it proved something. That brief, wonderful experience of hers was no dream, it was a reality; and the resemblance to Barnard Lee had stung it into life and everyone else must be free for a time. Free—to find out and understand!

Tremaine opened his eyes and gazed into the face bending over his. A resemblance startled him too; made him strong, but wandering. He wandered back.

"You are like your mother," he whispered. "Vallé—her name was Vallé; I wouldn't let the name die with her. At first I wished that I had—it hurt; you hurt. It has taken long to—to get over the hurt."

Vallé did not stop the slow, broken words. She drew her chair nearer and bent close. The likeness to Barnard Lee persisted. While it lasted she dared not interrupt. She felt that at last things were becoming clear.

Tremaine rambled on, taking for granted that much, much was known.

"You've read her letter, your mother's?" It was as if he had died and the letter had been given to Vallé.

"Not yet, Father. It does not matter." What was any letter compared to what might be revealed now? The letter could wait.

"Doesn't matter?"—the dry, rattling laugh again.

"Doesn't matter that Lee, instead of me, is your father? That doesn't matter? Doesn't matter that your mother wanted you to know, some day?"

"No!" Nothing must stay the words now; but Tremaine suddenly realized what he was saying.

"Steve! Trench!" He raised his sharp, rasping voice; he tried to lift himself from the pillow. "Trench!"

Kemel Trench rushed up the bare, narrow stairs. "Here I am, Tremaine. What is it?"

"The letter—give it to Vallé. There has been too—too much crawling and hiding. She must know."

Vallé could not move, but Trench seemed undisturbed.

"Take it easy, Tremaine," he said. "Here's the letter. I agree with you about slinking and hiding. Lie down, now. Here, Vallé—here is the letter."

Trench took it from his pocket, gave it to Vallé, and then leaned over Tremaine, quieting him, easing him back on the pillows. "Anything that is normal," he soothed, "can be tackled. It's the tricking facts that cause trouble. Now then, Tremaine, everything's going to be all right."

Vallé took the letter to the fire and tried to read the words intelligently. They were like words in a foreign language, but here and there were words she could understand. Someone was telling something, making her understand if possible. "This is my

mother," the reality crept in—"my mother! She is telling me things." Slowly the strange words took on meaning. "Barnard Lee"—the words ran on—"would not believe; I knew that, my child. But you must believe, you must. If you are a woman when you read this, you will."

"Of course!" Something in Vallé agreed.

Barnard Lee would *not* believe; he'd think the worst! The *worst!*

But those words were not in the letter. Those words were in Vallé's brain, hammering away, but she understood. Again, and once again, Vallé read the letter. She looked at the date. It was an old letter, a letter as old as she was, herself, and she seemed terribly old. She looked over to the bed. Trench was smoothing the covers, actually patting Tremaine's restless hands. It all seemed natural enough; no one was frightened or horrified but Vallé—Vallé, who now understood, in a way at least, the words she had read; she alone was horrified at the cruelty of life. At last strength came to her to move over to the bed.

"Kemel," she asked, and her voice was low but calm, "Kemel, may I ask him some questions?"

Trench nodded. He knew that John Tremaine was all but past the need of earthly care, and life would soon grip Vallé anew. She mattered now.

"You are John Lee, dear?" Vallé whispered.

Tremaine looked up relieved, eased. He smiled and

nodded. It was like being freed from a mask that had smothered him.

"And Steve. Steve is—Stephen Lee?"

"Yes; God bless Steve, he chose me."

"And you loved my mother?"

"Yes, yes."

"And she loved you?"

"Yes."

"And yet——"

Tremaine turned to Trench. "Tell her, Trench," he said, "that about standards——"

" 'Every man shall pitch by his own standard,' " Trench said slowly, as if he were in some holy place.

"That's it, Trench. Vallé, it was our standard—hers and mine—and it broke us—broke us; but it left us——"

"Safe," Trench broke in.

Vallé bent beside the bed. She pressed her lips against Tremaine's thin, cold hands, clasped loosely as if they were well done with life.

"Oh! I wish that you *were* my father!" she moaned. "I wish you were and that she, my mother, had—had you!"

"Trench, do you hear that?" Tremaine's eyes glittered. "Trench, do you hear that?"

"Yes, I hear it, Tremaine."

"And—and you don't want to—to curse her? Oh!" —that rattling laugh. "You—a minister of God?"

"No, by my God, I want to—to bless her!"

"Trench, take her downstairs and talk things over. I want to remember." Then: "Poor old Barney! This would be the—the last straw."

Of course Vallé knew that the day was lived through in a commonplace way. They ate, they swept and put in order the cold, bare room. A doctor came—he was all but frozen, but he spoke with authority.

"A few days at the most. A week, perhaps. These fine, lean men last longer."

The rough fellows staying on to do the hardest work came in and went out, their heavy, clumsy boots creaking dismally as they tried to step noiselessly up and down stairs! The amused smile drifted over Tremaine's face; once or twice there was heard the rattling laugh and the hoarse words: "Poor old Barney . . . last straw."

Once when Vallé knelt by the bed Tremaine said with an effort: "I tried to forget what you cost—I couldn't."

"Never mind—Father!" They smiled at each other over the broken barriers.

It was late one night when Stephen, Trench, and Vallé sat by the fire in the living room. Tremaine was sleeping.

"There's going to be more storm," Trench muttered. "My feet hurt."

Stephen shuddered and looked shyly at Vallé. All

day he had looked that way at her. She tried to smile the look away. Everything was simple enough now.

"Steve," she said gently, "tell me exactly how it was when you got there—to my mother." She saw that Stephen was longing to talk at last.

"There isn't must to tell. She was all but gone. There was you. I could not bring you back here. I did my best."

"Yes, Steve. You did. And through all the years the money that—that Mr. Lee sent was spent on me—and some of yours, too, Steve?"

"Not much of mine. We had to live, John and I, you know."

Suddenly Vallé seemed to see the luxury and ease of Barnard Lee's life—the soft rugs and beautiful things. She shuddered.

"No wonder you both hated me," she whispered.

"We—we didn't hate you, Vallé. We only tried hard not to—to get to caring too much for you. John always felt that in the end Barnard should be forced to——"

Trench, who had been smoking silently, now shook the ashes from his pipe and stood up. The look of authority was upon him.

"See here, Steve," he said, "before the storm gets in its worst licks we've got to have Barnard Lee here!"

"Barnard Lee!" Both Vallé and Stephen repeated the name.

"Yes. He's got to have the saving chance of remorse! He's got to see the work—the damnable work—of his hate and stupidity. We have no right to keep his possible salvation from him. I'm going to get a telegram off to-night, somehow. The men, one of them, will go with me and we'll wait for Lee."

"He—he will not come!" Stephen gasped.

"Then by the eternal right of things I'll go to him and force the chance upon him. I cannot stand by and see a man headed for hell and not give him a hope of salvation. Vallé——"

"Yes, Kemel."

"Keep close to that man upstairs. He'll want nobody but you, really, from now on."

Into the storm-threatened night Trench, with one man, set forth in the sled. Stephen's eyes followed Vallé about the silent room until at last she went upstairs. John Tremaine had nothing more to tell, but the little he had told gave him a sort of peace.

A candle and the fire lighted his room. He lay upon his back, his fine face lifted, his hands that were through with life still loosely folded on his heaving chest; the breath came hard.

Vallé knelt and laid her face on the thin hands. Tremaine opened his eyes, looked at her pretty bent

head and smiled contentedly. In snatches he talked—often the meaning was confused.

"The cold and storm and loneliness were the worst." Then: "I have seen sunrises and sunsets in the—the woods. I've known good men and bad—that's life, isn't it?"

"Yes, Father."

"Vallé——"

"Yes, Father."

"You meant that about me and—and her?"

"Yes; yes, I meant it."

"I wonder if your mother and I made a mistake?" Then: "Queer, the mix-up in us all. Good, bad—the standards and all that. Trench says—quite insists—that it will all be straightened out. I wonder." Then, after a long pause and much struggling with breath: "The things I most deplore are the things I—I didn't do."

"Never mind, Father."

"I should never have lain down under what I called Fate. I thought it was all I could do then. I was wrong. I could have downed Fate. I should have loved you, Vallé. You were so patient and seeking. Poor child!"

Vallé's tears fell unheeded upon the cold quiet hands.

"It should come out right, somehow. But"—and there was real power in Tremaine's voice—"you'll hold to your standard—don't forget that. It may grind you

and hurt you, but you'll have to keep to it. And—poor Barney—the last straw!"

Tremaine slept, wakened, rallied and slept again.

Two days after Trench's departure word was sent back:

"He's coming. We'll wait and bring him."

Lee was going to have his chance to know remorse!

The weary, all-but-frozen men came in with the oncoming storm: Lee, Trench, and two lumbermen. The horses were spent, the snow was like ice in its hardness, and the wind that bore it from the north was howling in rage.

Stephen and Vallé had worked all day to prepare what comfort they could. It seemed little enough when all was said and done. The great room was only warm close by the fire—the corners were icy and dim.

"Well, Vallé," Lee spoke at last, "I have letters for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee."

"My hands are stiff——"

"The letters can wait. Come to the fire. Steve will bring hot coffee. You must thaw out and eat first."

"Steve!" Lee turned. Stephen was coming into the room from the kitchen. "Steve! God! Steve, say something."

Since meeting Trench, Lee had listened to so much, been so tragically prepared, that now his face looked like the face of a tortured creature. He had had the

letter, Trench had forwarded it to him, but had not dared to come until the telegram faced him.

"What is there to say, Barney?" Steve stood still, his head lowered.

"There *are* things, Steve. They must be said."

"Well, they can wait." Stephen went to and from the kitchen bearing food—more food, more hot coffee.

"I am in time, Vallé?" Lee turned toward the girl.

"Father is sleeping." Vallé said the words calmly, but there was definite meaning in them. Lee dropped his eyes.

After supper, with Trench as guide, Lee went upstairs and stood beside his brother's bed. Long he looked down at the fine, quiet face. Then he took the chair Trench placed for him.

"I'll leave you together now," Trench said. "If you need us, call. We'll all be downstairs."

The storm howled and pressed close to the lonely house. The icy snow smashed against the windows. Lee looked out—even the night was blotted. Then he looked around at the bare room. There was merely a rag rug by the bed, but for all its austerity there was a suggestion of comfort and rigid order about the place. Lee remembered his brother's love of luxury—soft, exquisite things. There had been an apartment noted for its taste and comfort. Suddenly he recalled John's dislike of cold. There had been open fires in that apartment—they were kept burning, early and

late—and there had been a manservant. And in this wilderness of storm and cold and ugliness, for twenty years and more, he had condemned his brother to stay! Had paid him in order to keep him there, had gloated over his power at last in eliminating his brother. He had called it his righteous anger for a dishonorable deed. Barnard Lee knew now that that was not so! The deed, the dishonor were nothing compared to other things.

Trench had said some terrible things as they came through the black storm and cold. Trench had driven in truth—truth! Lee knew truth when it was forced past the guard of his conceit and vanity. Trench knew how to drive truth home.

"Paid," Lee thought on, "and the money I paid went to support my child. Good God! *my* child." Then Lee clenched his teeth, remembering Vallé and that thing he believed about her and Arnold—the thing that Ivas had taken upon herself in order to shield Vallé. Ivas had talked freely, driven by Brian Brooke. Lee knew now pretty much all there was to know. He had had a terrible scene with Brooke and Ivas—and now this!

The storm gained in fury. Had there ever been such a storm before? Had John and that poor delicate Steve weathered such horrors for years and years of hideous winters? And John had "worked out his salvation." That is what Trench had thundered in Lee's ears

above the storm as they were driving through the woods. "You would not let him have the chance of working it out when he fell, Barnard Lee, but not one of us outwits the Power that controls us all. He worked it out here, though the devil in him did his damnedest. John Tremaine conquered. Conquered, I tell you. He's fought a good fight and won out!"

Lee looked at the gaunt figure on the bed—so still, so indifferent to him at last. Downstairs there were the sounds of men moving quietly about. Men who would face death calmly enough for John Lee. There was that girl—Vallé—she had called John "Father"! Called John "Father," not him. Like Stephen, she had chosen! And there were Ivas and Brooke. Lee drew his breath in sharply recalling that scene with Ivas and Brooke after he had read the letter Trench had forwarded to him, and he had been forced to confess the truth!

"There's no one left to me. I've lost everything." His head dropped on his chest. He tried to recall John Lee's evil doings—the actual dishonesty, the things he had known, the things he had believed he knew; he wanted some reënforcement. How cruelly inadequate they all seemed now with the wind howling among the storm-racked trees—and John at ease with folded hands. Then it was that remorse clutched and wrung Barnard Lee's soul; his heart thumped and his eyes burned.

And presently, as if the storm outside and inside distressed him, John Lee opened his eyes. His gaze rested upon Barnard's tortured face. It took some time for consciousness to come back from where it had ventured. But there was one thing more for John Lee to do before he could go on, so he rallied.

"Barney!"

"Yes, John."

"You believe about Vallé?"

"Yes, as God hears me, John. Yes, I believe—now!"

"If things can be straightened out she'll be glad to know it at last."

Lee tried to speak, but failed. John went on:

"Poor old Barney! Don't be too hard on yourself. That about Vallé was all that really mattered. Can they put you up comfortably for—for the night?"

"John—John!" Lee stood up and gazed at the quiet face on the pillow. Then he called.

It was Trench who came up the narrow, steep stairs. One look at the brothers and he understood. He put his hand on Lee's shoulder.

"You came," he said quietly. "You've sent him forth unburdened. You've got to set your own house in order now, Mr. Lee. Brace up."

Lee bowed his head and turned away.

CHAPTER XVI

After the heavy storm, after the body of John Lee had been laid in the grave that men worked days in preparing, Stephen, Trench, Lee, and Vallé gathered night after night in the big room. They dreaded the future almost as much as they did the past and yet they knew sooner or later it must be reckoned with.

Vallé had read and reread Brooke's letters. Such tender, stirring letters.

"At your first word I will come, my darling."

But no reference to what Ivas had told him with its weight of meaning—the worst, or not quite the worst! Did it not matter? Was Brian's love such that even the *worst* would not matter? If that were so, such love must not be imposed upon. The worst had not happened, but it might have. She might have loved Arnold. Would *that* not have mattered to Brian? Against that Vallé's tired brain throbbed and ached. She could not accept loyalty, forgiveness.

"I am not Vallé Tremaine, I am Vallé Lee. I am Ivas's sister—her sister!" That, too, throbbed and

throbbed against the sore, heavy brain with its memory of Ivas's confession.

"I *must* have time to think clearly. I am so tired," Vallé thought, and all the while her eyes were sore from weeping and her heart longed at such times for Brooke on any terms. Any! That was just it.

"No, I must think this out—and Brian must, and Ivas." To that end all her weary conclusions led. "A little time apart will make things stand out plain."

While in that mood Vallé had written to Brooke: "I ask, dear, dear boy, for the freedom you once said you would grant if I wanted it. Dear, I ask for it now. Just a little while—a little while. I will be with Stephen and Kemel Trench and you must think straight and true; we all must."

To that Brooke had grimly acceded, but the look on his face haunted Ivas Lee through the black days while she waited for her father's return. Driven to the wall by her doubts—her awful and sudden awakening to truth—Ivas was near a nervous breakdown. She, who believed herself superior to all that.

During those days she did some rather wild things. She went to Miss Moore with her letters from her father, and that lady was made quite ill by them. She had to go to bed and call her doctor. Dismayed by Miss Moore's inability to stand up under truth, ugly as it was—for Ivas was unsparing of herself—she went to old Miss Arnold. She felt the sore need of

sympathy—guidance. Miss Arnold's reactions were stimulating. She seemed to be revived by Ivas's wild talk, by the girl's remorse, her very evident suffering.

"Now see here," she said at last, "all this stops right here until your father and this Vallé Brooke come back. You've made a sad mess of things, my dear, and are frightened to death now that it turns on you. As far as I can make out, this Vallé Brooke simply went to my nephew's studio—is there anything so criminal in that? If I know Brian Brooke at all, he would be mightily surprised to discover that his old friend was such a menace——"

"Oh, Miss Arnold, please!" Ivas was haggard with mortification, but her self-respect rallied even under the old woman's stern, flashing eyes.

"But you must see, Miss Arnold, what interpretation might be put upon it, was put upon it."

"By whom?"

"My father."

"Your father has been putting interpretations upon things all his life, my dear girl, and much joy they have brought him, from all I can learn. The worst interpretations instead of the best—that has been your father's evil habit." Miss Arnold, now that she had taken up arms, was making a strong attack.

Ivas sat white and trembling before her. She longed to defend her father but could not! That was the pity of it—her honesty still held her back.

"You did not know when you made your big gesture, my dear, that you were shielding your sister, did you?"

"What difference would that have made?" Ivas flashed forth.

"That's the first thing to your credit that I've heard you say yet, my dear." Miss Arnold's face softened. "You did this, then, to spare Brian Brooke?" The truth was out at last.

"Yes, Miss Arnold." Simple truth was all that could be spoken with those keen eyes upon one.

"I see. And now Brooke has got to face that fact and control his tongue! My dear, my dear, it seems to me that a very small fish caused a splutter in the pan—but the hot fat will burn as painfully as if it had been a whale."

"You make me feel so vile." Ivas dropped her eyes.

"You seemed bent upon making this Vallé Brooke rather vile, my dear. It was your interpretation that makes me sad. Go home, my dear girl, and calm yourself. Practise the old-fashioned virtue of holding your tongue until your sister makes a move. It looks to me as if she were the only one who has kept balance."

"But—Keith——" Ivas rose unsteadily.

At this Miss Arnold laughed. "Keith! Well, I insist that you leave Keith to me. I'm sure he'd quite forget himself were you to approach him. He might box your ears. Making the worst of things is about the

least of Keith's immoralities and he's touchy about it. No, my dear, go home and get some rest. You look as if all your up-to-date philosophy had failed you. Remember, *rest* and hold your tongue."

With this advice Ivas retreated to her lonely home to await results. No one disturbed her. She longed for Brian, but Brian was working early and late at the office.

And things were reaching the breaking point at Hedged In. Nerves were tense and emotions were becoming confused. Barnard Lee felt as if he must flee the place or go mad, but he knew he dared not turn his back on it until he had taken some stand for the future. The others acted as if that were the last thing to be considered, at least any mention of a future in which Lee shared. They looked at him furtively; they tried to include him in the dull round of duties, but he was like a ghost seeking a familiar niche that was covered by the dust of years.

More and more, as Vallé looked at him and remembered her father, she clung to the old name. Her young rebellion rose hotly. When she turned her eyes on Stephen a fierce determination shook her.

Trench stood by like a brooding presence. He rarely left the three alone; yet he did not seem to intrude.

"Steve," Vallé one day blurted out when, for a moment, Lee had left the room, "you and Kemel and

I will see some way out and you must get back to your music."

She saw Stephen's wonderful eyes light. "He cannot accept Mr. Lee," she thought, "nor can I, just now. We've got to get away, together."

This was a beginning and that night the inevitable conversation took place. The four came to grips.

Barnard Lee, with grim determination, broke the barrier by saying:

"Steve, you and I can at least try to understand each other. Won't you make it possible for me to do—do what I may?"

Vallé looked up, surprised. Such words, in such a tone, from Lee amazed her. Then she looked at Stephen. The expression of fear, shrinking fear, the fear of another blow on an already suffering soul and body, crept into his eyes.

"You will let me help you, Steve?"

"I—I do not need help, Barnard."

"But what are you going to do, Steve? You cannot stay here. Vallé must go back to—to her husband. Steve, for God's sake, let me do something!"

At this Kemel Trench drew nearer. No one resented him. Lee, even, felt his silent, pervading influence. He looked at him now with hope.

"Trench, can you not suggest something? You must see my claim—I still have a claim."

"Yes, I see it," Trench said slowly, "but I do not see that you have the right to press it—just now."

"I only want to do at last——"

"I understand, but your time and God's time may not tally, Mr. Lee."

Lee drew a deep breath. God's time and his was a new idea to him, one that he would be slow in accepting.

"What then?" he asked dully.

"Steve, Vallé, and I are going to—to Italy," Trench said slowly.

This came like an electric shock to them all.

"Italy?" Vallé whispered, and for a moment she feared that she was going to laugh.

"Italy?" Lee shifted his position. "Italy, you say?" and he fixed his stern eyes on Trench.

Stephen gave a long drawn-out sigh, as though some pressure had been released.

"Yes, sir, Italy." Trench had the bit between his teeth. "Yes, sir, Italy. The way I look at it is this: Steve's music must have a chance and he must thaw out. He's kept his genius alive. It must grow now and save his soul for him."

"But even in Italy," Lee was still benumbed, "there must be money needed. I agree with you, Steve must have the best."

"I have money enough." And now Trench's eyes grew sad. "Your brother, Mr. Lee, through all the

years, has manipulated a little sum I had until it brings a decent income now. Steve, too, has something; we can manage but I feel that we owe it to Steve to let him do his own deciding. Speak up, Steve."

As if slowly coming out of a trance, a long trance, Stephen spoke.

"Trench is right, Barnard. For a time I must be free. Free of everything that has all but finished me and what talent I have."

"You include me in that, Steve?"

"Yes, Barnard, God forgive us! Yes. By and by I may be able to feel different. As it is now, I must have time to forget and put something else in—in its place."

Lee bowed his head as if acknowledging that the verdict, hard as it was, was just. He turned to Vallé.

"But you, your duty to your husband——" He got no further.

Vallé said quietly: "After all, that must be my problem and Brian's, must it not, Mr. Lee?" There was gentle dignity in her voice; no resentment.

Trench, looking on, knew at that moment sincere pity for Lee. He sensed the deep hopelessness that was facing the man, here and in the place he called home. And yet Trench saw further. He saw, illumined by that unfaltering faith of his, the perfect working out of a divine plan. He could abide in patience. Had he not so abided and suffered through all the years?

Nothing could separate Trench from the hope that was in him.

"Well," said Lee at last—his back was turned on the others—"how soon can I leave here?"

"To-morrow, Mr. Lee. The men are waiting for your decision," Trench answered.

"*My* decision!" Lee gave a hard laugh. "My decision! Oh, well, I will start to-morrow."

And during all this time Brian Brooke was facing a difficult stretch of road alone, utterly alone. So best, he believed, could he serve Vallé's best interests. Appreciating her reactions to the full, he respected them, though yearning with all his soul to go to her and prove to her—— Just what? She must not doubt his love! That was all that swayed Brooke; held him silent and alone. The method was what mattered. Ivas's confession had all but driven him to useless extremes. After hearing it his first impulse had been to turn his back upon Lee and all that Lee stood for and take Vallé into a new environment—a new life. Old associations had held him mute while Ivas was speaking, growing more and more agonized under his silent and rebuking attention. He had made her feel crude and baffled. He had tried not to; he had wanted to make her feel that he sympathized with her muddled intentions at least, but he had not been able to say anything that might help. He had merely looked and

listened. At last he had mustered the question to which poor Ivas was later to grow accustomed.

"Would you have—have done what you have, Ivas, had you known then Vallé's relation to you?"

"I—yes, Brian, I think I would have."

"I wonder." Ivas had flushed under his calm glance. What difference could there have been had the relationship been known? Ivas had been too honest to dodge the truth. Vallé—a stranger within the gates would have had less claim upon their faith and understanding. No, she had done what she had done for Brian alone.

"Oh, Brian," Ivas had cried at last, "how poor a thing you make me seem. Forgive me. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Yes, I can," and Brooke had actually smiled. After all, he was human enough to appreciate Ivas's effort and the sad love that had driven her to it; and he was humble enough, sane enough, to let her see how fully he understood. "Yes, Ivas, but let us not refer to this again until Vallé comes back."

When Vallé came back—that was the main concern. "No one shall drive her; I will not even influence her," Brooke thought savagely, and when Barnard Lee came back with his report of what had occurred, Brooke was even more determined and savage.

"You must exert your control, Brian," Lee said.

"My what?" Brooke asked.

"Your rights," Lee faltered. He resented the growing need of nice choosing of words when expressing himself.

At this Brooke gave a strange laugh. Lee resented that, too.

It was a few days later that Keith Arnold entered Brooke's private office with his briefcase under his arm. Arnold looked as if he were about to deal an ugly blow at someone but was not quite sure of his aim. He was angry but cautious. He had just come from his aunt's after having given the elevator man the key of his studio wrapped in a ten-dollar bill.

The short interview with Miss Arnold had so unsettled Keith's view upon life that when he walked out of her presence he had brought his manuscript with him, feeling that Brian's reception of what he had to say would settle definitely his own future either in New York or some distant section of the earth. The session with Miss Arnold had been short and hectic.

"What have you been up to, Son?" was Miss Arnold's welcome. Ivas's late confession had been rankling during her lonely hours. "You look skimpy and guilty."

"I feel skimpy but I have a clear conscience. You look pinched yourself, Mary Jane. Have you been pining for me?"

"Yes, and now that you are here, sit down."

"May I take my coat off?"

"Yes, but if you're the man I take you for, you'll put it on again soon. Keith, where have you been? No shilly-shallying now. No more Africas or castles in Spain. I'm in deadly earnest and I'll brook no nonsense. Where have you been this last week?"

Quietly Keith gave her the information she asked. He saw that something serious was at stake.

"Have you heard about the Lee-Tremaine farce?" Miss Arnold was holding her nephew's gaze with her own angry one.

"No. I've been working like the devil on the last scene, you know."

Miss Arnold briefly informed him. It sounded like melodrama, dealt out as it was in scraps. Arnold listened, still staring.

"Keith, Ivas Lee came here the other day. She's stirred up a nice mare's nest—or is it a hornet's?"

"Ivas Lee?"

"Yes. There's a nice example of the modern girl for you. All the small tricks of past generations twisted out of shape and called new inventions."

"Please, Mary Jane, let's have what you are driving at."

"Very well. You shall have it, but remember, my son, if there is one thing I hate more than a plain fool it is a damned fool. After I am through I shall judge you by the way you deal with your own folly."

Briefly Miss Arnold unburdened herself. Keith

listened, his eyes growing hot and his mouth setting in ugly lines.

"Where is Vallé Brooke now?" he asked at last.

"Up in that God-forsaken place she came from."

"Where's Brian?"

"Here—holding himself in check. Quite like him, you know."

"Well, of all the wicked rot!" Keith burst out, and grabbed his coat.

"Where are you going?" Miss Arnold asked.

"Going? I'm going to Brooke, of course."

Miss Arnold relaxed. "I see you are not the kind of fool I particularly loathe," she said with a relieved smile. "Coming to dinner, Keith?"

"That depends."

"I shall expect you, Son, and bring Brian along with you."

It was after this talk that Keith walked into Brooke's office with his briefcase under his arm.

CHAPTER XVII

BROOKE looked up at Keith's sudden entrance.

"Hello!" he said. "Sit down. I'm glad to see you."

This greeting upset Arnold's state of mind. What he had expected he hardly knew, but certainly not this.

"Brian," he blurted, "I've just heard from my aunt about this devil of a mess. I've been working—shutting myself away from and out of everything. I just had a talk with my aunt——"

"And you've come straight to me. You would, of course."

More and more Arnold was becoming confused. Things were not running true to form—any form, as far as he could judge. Again Arnold plunged.

"There's just one thing, old man, that I'm going to insist upon from the start—then we can go on. Vallé didn't at any stage of this pitiable mess make a——"

"That's one thing we can take for granted, Keith, can we not?" Brooke was helping Arnold over dangerous ground. There was a dull fire in his eyes, but

Arnold sensed his clear understanding and gained courage.

"You're not trying to bluff me off, Brian, are you?" he asked, and the old years of friendship pleaded in his tones.

"No—I'm going to drag you closer into this, Keith. It's a simple enough thing if it's handled all right. It can be easily messed, though."

"I see that."

"I hope you do, Keith. If you *do* you will understand why I am here and Vallé is at Hedged In."

There was a moment of silence while the old friendly confidence was reëstablished. What was seething in both men's minds was one doubt, however, that could not be voiced.

"Does she care for him?" was ringing in Brooke's aching brain as he looked at his friend.

"Does she care for me?" whirled and whirled in Arnold's.

But no vestige of shame rested upon Vallé in either man's thoughts of her.

"Why in thunder aren't you up there at Hedged In?" Arnold broke the silence.

"I'm doing what's best for Vallé by staying here," Brooke said quietly.

Again Arnold understood, his lips twitched. "It's sporting of you, old man," was all he could manage. But he realized why Brooke was holding himself in

check. He was giving Vallé time and freedom for thought. He was too big and fine to press any claim in the light of rights. Vallé must answer the question that lay deep in each man's heart.

"It's sporting of you, old man," he repeated inanely. Then he rallied and said something that cost him more than Brooke was ever to know. "All the same, Brian, your place is up there with Vallé. You don't know women."

"I think, I hope, I know Vallé, Keith."

"All the same, she may get a twist. She may feel that you—— Oh! damn it all, Brian. You don't think I am holding anything back, do you?"

"I'm sure you're not, old man. I really do not think you could, even if you wanted to."

"Meaning?" the two men looked at each other before Brooke replied:

"Keith, I'm going to tell you what must always be sacred to us both. I took a big chance when I married Vallé. I'm a one-woman man. Knowing that, I still took my chance. I brought her from a life—I can understand it now—of mystery and unhappiness. In a way I set her free in taking my chance. I do not want her gratitude, pity, or loyalty, Keith. I want but one thing from her—her love! She is now capable of dealing with life unhampered. She must remain unhampered until she has made her own decision. That's the kind I am—call me by any name you choose."

Arnold felt as if he were in a strange place. The light was blinding, it hurt. It made him cringe. He asked a foolish question:

"Lord! man, does ice or fire run in your veins?"

"Neither. Simply blood—plain blood."

Arnold got up and walked to the window, not daring to speak. Brooke had overpowered him, for the moment. He was wise enough to realize that no calculating cold-bloodedness controlled Brooke—it was passion; a love that could not accept husks; a pride that could abide patiently, but could not plead. This was a new interpretation of certain old facts of life. At last Keith turned.

"I do not understand you any better now than I did at college, Brian, but you'll always be the closest friend in my life; my curiosity, if nothing else, grips you. Will you come up to my aunt's to dinner tonight?"

"Thanks. I'll be glad to. I'd rather have an evening with her than with anyone else. I'll join you later. Seven?"

"Seven. Yes."

Their hands met. And then the door closed upon Arnold and Brooke sat staring out at the lighting of the city—the city that Vallé had loved so well.

And at that hour Trench, Stephen, and Vallé were concluding their plans. They had worked rapidly after

Lee's departure and it was astonishing how Trench, long exiled from the places of ordinary men, could manage and achieve. Reservations for Italy had been secured; letters were already on their way to a little place near Florence—Stephen had helped there. He felt he must go back to that beauty-haunted spot where he and John had had their one happy vacation together.

"It will seem as if he may be there," Stephen had ventured.

"He probably *will* be there, Steve," Trench nodded understandingly. "When we get there we may find that he has set wheels going——"

"He would if he could," Vallé quietly broke in. Then: "I have a wonderful letter from Brian. He understands. I do not see how he can, but he does. All my life I shall remember that he *does* understand."

"What does he say?" Trench turned. Brooke puzzled Trench as he did Keith Arnold.

"Oh! many heavenly things, among them this: He feels I owe Uncle Steve something; that the world owes him something."

Stephen, busy at the other end of the room, looked up. "No one owes me anything," he said proudly and with some spirit. "If I hadn't let go back there in the past, much might have been saved. Another man——"

"Come, come, Steve," Trench looked stern, "none of that. You *were no* other man. There's just one

course for you to pursue now and make up for wasted time as you go."

It was late April when Stephen, Vallé, and Trench sailed away. Not even Brooke knew when they went. Hard as it was for Vallé, hard as it would be for Brooke to remember, Trench had advised it.

The early May of that year was glorious in Italy. The sunlight, the flowers, the strangeness—all combined to raise the spirits of the three.

"It almost seems as if he *were* here," Stephen exclaimed one day after they had reached the little town near Florence where that long-ago vacation had been passed. "Things running so easily, you know, Trench. Our finding this house with its garden and view, so cheap. And the old music master next door, too old to do much but not too old to help me to do more."

Trench looked at Stephen sharply. At times he felt as if he were with a stranger until he beheld the poor, twisted, familiar body.

"You know how I feel about such things, Steve?"

"Yes, I know. It's easier to think that way here than back there."

"Where's Vallé?" asked Trench.

"Gone to look up some woman to help here. She told me that my hands must be kept from hard work and I told her that hers must, too. We grew quite hot about it."

"She'll find a woman!" Again Trench fixed his eyes

on the twisted back—it was like a familiar landmark that steadied him when he beheld Stephen's excited eyes and smiling mouth.

They were an odd trio, Stephen, Trench, and Vallé. Examples of amusing Americans—so their neighbors thought. They lived quietly, except for their eternal music, in a little house with a lovely garden that had been left much to its own wild flowering, but had not gone astray. People did not try to account for them or explain them. They were Americans to the Italians and they let it go at that. No one was interested in them except the old man, famous in his day, who spent almost all his waking hours with Stephen and shared with him his knowledge of violins and his reverence for genius.

"It is the spark," he repeated to Trench and Vallé, "the divine spark, but what has all but killed it? Not the poor body! No! the genius is too real for that. What then?"

Trench tried to tell him in a mixture of languages that all but drove the old man frantic.

"He chose exile. What you mean, exile? Divine justice—what does that mean? Oh! I begin to follow," and the old man struggled to follow where the idea led. "But that," he cried at last, "that service does not kill genius—it enriches it. Oh! I will remember and work the harder."

Under the warm skies and with only friendly com-

panionship, Stephen began to lift his eyes and smile.

There were the little extravagances and the amusing economies; the daily work and the lovely little trips over old roads where pilgrims' feet before theirs had trod. There was music in the churches—Trench could bow his head here in these churches. "They're honest," he explained—"the worshipers, anyway."

Vallé wrote constantly to Brooke, occasionally to Ivas, and once or twice to Keith Arnold. What was going on in her secret nature she could not tell; she only knew that she was developing a sure sense of proportions and values. If the growing pains hurt at times, she did not flinch. Further and further she was reaching out to an open space unencumbered by the presence of others or their claims. For this she thanked God—and Brian Brooke!

And Stephen, too, was seeing more clearly. With his music becoming more and more vital he regarded it impersonally, and when he did his dwarfed and crooked body got in between him and the thing he wanted to do.

"Who is going to forget this—this body of mine," he said one day to Trench, "no matter what my playing amounts to? I tell you, Trench, we cannot discount it."

Trench looked savage. "And you're going to permit that body to stand in the way of your genius, Steve?" Trench stood and glared. "You think the God who

made you hadn't it in mind when he put it and your talent together? Can't you learn to—to think it may be an asset?" Trench paused and then rushed on: "Who is going to look at your body when you are filling their souls with music? You made black hours shine for your brother; make them shine for the many, Steve, and forget your body."

"Stop, Trench, I'll do my best."

But Trench repeated something of this to Vallé.

"Of course," he said, "until he can *make* people forget his body they will see it, and the mob is usually brutal and squint-eyed."

Vallé listened and then she said something that had long been in her mind.

"I'm ignorant, Kemel, I really do not know anything about it, but I have been sort of daydreaming. There is this unseen audience we hear so much about—the audience on the air. If Steve could play to it until he made it worship him, perhaps they would not mind his poor dear body so much."

Trench shook his head. "Turn such talent as Steve's on the radio," he muttered. "Lord! I cannot bear to think of such a thing. Every dance hall and saloon listening in to Steve's wonderful music! Lord!"

"But, Kemel, others, too, would be listening. They say in hospitals, prisons among the lonely, the unhappy, the suffering—all listen in. Oh! I love to think of the unseen audience."

Trench turned sharply. "I catch what you mean." Then he laughed his shy laugh that always marked his more spiritual mood. "Long ago," he said, more to himself than to Vallé, "there was One who remembered that. One thinks of it all the more over here—the churches and all *get you.* He didn't spurn the wayside when He saw an opportunity to reach out. This unseen audience was His audience."

"Yes, that's what I mean, Kemel. It doesn't matter so much *how* if you reach a waiting soul. Steve could make anyone forget, Kemel, and—remember! All the years of Hedged In seem only to have fed this soul of his. Now that it has come out it is wonderful, but it is timid. On the air—oh! can you not see?"

"Yes, and Steve, lifting his head as he is doing now, gives people a chance to see his eyes, the beauty of his expression. The fear is going. After a time he and others will forget his affliction and see only the soul of him."

And then another day on the hills overlooking the city, with Steve's haunting music coming to them from a safe distance, Trench said:

"Vallé, what are you going to do with your life?" It was time to consider that now and something in Trench seemed to grow silent as he waited.

"It's what life is doing with me, Kemel, that seems to matter."

"Well, what *is* it doing to you?"

"So many things I hardly know. It makes me want to cry and laugh, sing and grieve, but most of all it is making me *see* and *feel* and *know*."

"Well, that's something, Vallé." Trench smiled and lifted his eyes to hers. He loved the warmth and sun of Italy. He felt warm for the first time in his life. It was thawing him out and the rapt smile of Vallé thrilled him.

"You see, Kemel, my training has made me—what shall I say?—not only greedy for life and what life means, but selfish and cautious, far-sighted and yet——"

"You do not seem selfish to me, Vallé. Somehow your being here bucking poor Steve up gives the lie to that, and the Lord knows you could get pretty much what every woman wants by taking the next steamer to New York."

"That's what I mean, Kemel, when I said that about being cautious."

Trench turned a clear, demanding glance on Vallé. "Do you love your husband?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes, Kemel, but I *could* love another man—I know that, now. I could—but——"

"You mean you *do* love another man?"

"Oh! Kemel, don't put me in the torture chamber. I said I *could,* not that I *do!*"

This was a new aspect of things to Trench. Something he had not suspected. It complicated things.

"I do not suppose I have a right to question you, Vallé," he muttered.

"No, Kemel dear, you haven't. This is my big question. I'll get the answer fixed some day."

Then Vallé said something that often and often Kemel Trench was to remember. "You see, Kemel, until recently I did not know myself—I never had a chance to know—but now I realize that I am both my father's and my mother's daughter. It helps while it hurts—the knowledge, you know. Life is not so simple as I once thought and I must not make a mistake, now that I know this."

Stephen's music, from a distance, rose and fell; the spicy, sweet air touched their faces. Trench leaned toward Vallé and laid a lean brown hand on her knee.

" 'Every man shall pitch by his own standard,' " he said gently, and sighed a deep sigh.

"Yes, that's it. Thank you, Kemel, and we cannot do anything else." Vallé was remembering John Tremaine. Her eyes dimmed. Then: "But I am coming out into light, Kemel. I think we can plan about going back soon. Let us go in the autumn."

The days following were heart-searching days for Vallé. There must be no weakening this time. She was learning to know herself, picturing herself now against a background she had tested only a little, but enough to recognize its power and her own nature. Barnard Lee—her father! Ivas—her sister! In the

wakeful hours of the night, they seemed to be pushing her back upon her newly-found self and demanding their rights. She seemed to see Lee's haunted face and Ivas's thwarted one. How was she to deal with them?

Oh! if she had before known all as she knew it now—how different the past would have been! But how? In just what way?

That is what made a coward of Vallé; made her cling to the safety of exile with Stephen and Kemel Trench.

Then, as if in an effort to comfort her, thoughts of Keith Arnold came. Arnold with his indifference to cast-iron codes and the vagabond streak that something in Vallé responded to. Arnold might help her. "Oh, if I had only known all when I went among them before!" she cried again, but in the end her thoughts always rested upon Brian Brooke as upon a calm, steady, shining light going ahead into a place that had for a little while been theirs. Theirs alone. At such moments Arnold faded from view. Vallé was like a stranger who had once been guided into a far country, had been shown the leisure of that fair place of love and safety, and now if she reëntered it, it would be alone and—she must choose!

But in her lonely doubts Vallé never doubted Brooke's faith. His love was deep and sincere. He wished to prove that, his patient silence assured her; she never misunderstood it. He had no conception of

terms of agreement; in his proud devotion he seemed, honestly, to be saying that unless *Vallé came back because she chose to come, he did not want her back.* But as time went on Brooke was human enough to begin to feel that there must be something other than her own perplexed life and her duty to Stephen that was holding her away. There were moments when, looking at Keith Arnold, he *wondered.* But Arnold's frank, friendly eyes met his courageously, and because of that and Arnold's presence, Brian realized that he was worthy if Vallé chose him in the end. This very ability to be an onlooker as well as Vallé's lover often shook Brooke's endurance, made him doubt his own worth in the great adventure of love. Still, such doubts were fleeting—he *knew!* He must wait until some sure sign proved whether his test were to be acceptance or relinquishment. Yes, he loved Vallé to that extent. Where another might have tried to overpower resistance, Brooke hoped to see resistance shrivel and die. But he suffered and grew thin under the strain.

"Don't be a damned martyr," Arnold said one day with more unselfishness than Brooke could ever comprehend.

"No! On the other hand, I do not intend to be a damned fool." Something like anger flashed in Brooke's eyes. "What claims have I to press, Keith,

but those the law gives?—poor things in the last analysis where happiness is concerned."

"Lord! but you are pig-headed, Brian." Then: "How is that Stephen Tremaine, or Lee, getting on?"

"Rather splendidly, I hear."

"And that Trench fellow—he still in the group?"

"Yes. He will always be close to Stephen. It's a rare friendship, Keith."

"*Some* group!" Arnold gave his amused laugh. "I wonder how the natives regard them."

"Rather kindly from what Vallé writes."

Once Miss Moore lost her self-control and spoke: "You are making a laughing stock of yourself, Brian."

"Who is laughing, Aunt Con?" Brian's stern, thin face confronted Miss Moore.

"A figure of speech, my dear boy, but——"

"A damned bad figure, Aunt Con." Then: "I shall never forget what I owe you," he went on, "never, but there must be something that you owe me. Do not forget that."

Miss Moore never did.

Barnard Lee, too, drew near once, and only because Lee looked so old and gray did Brooke listen longer than he cared to and replied with more tolerance than he felt.

"Brian, would you like to be transferred to—to France? Crawford could use you."

"No. I prefer New York and the part of the business I've developed here. Thanks all the same, Mr. Lee."

"You'd be nearer Vallé."

"She'll be coming back before long." That was out of the blue, but it caused Lee to raise his head, and the frightened look came into his eyes. It was a new look: the look of a man who slept poorly and knew the sound of ghosts walking in silent and guarded places. Lee did not reply; his mouth set closer, that was all.

Ivas, perhaps, more than anyone else, reacted from the strain in a complex way. She had youth, consequently hope and elasticity, in her favor. She saw beyond the strain and uncertainty and she knew that *something* lay beyond. Just what she could not even picture, but it would eventually assume form—of that she was certain. For the present she was content, or she thought she was, with Brian's attitude toward her. There was no doubt that he was finding in her presence relief and all that he could call comfort. She was too wise to refer often to the conditions that held them all; never, unless Brooke spoke of them first. "Less said, less to explain," she thought, and acted upon it. But there were moments, too, when her face grew grim.

Keith Arnold's prolonged stay in town gave her both hope and discouragement. She saw what Brian saw—a kind of clean-cut bravery in the act. It was a thing that Vallé or any woman would admire. And suppose Vallé did care more for Arnold than anyone outwardly suspected—what then?

At that point Ivas's eyes grew dim and far-sighted. She held her own opinion about those visits to Arnold's studio. There was a good deal of the Puritan in Ivas for all her newer philosophy. "Well, I've deserved success if it ever comes," she thought, "and someone has said that that is better than to win it without deserving it." At this she made a wry face as if the comfort were but a poor and bitter sort. It took youth to endure the strain with anything resembling courage.

"I think," Ivas confided to Brooke once, "that we'd better let everything remain as it is, don't you? I mean about Father, Vallé, and me!"

Brooke nodded. "Of course," he added. "What else is there to do?"

"I was a fool to go and talk to old Miss Arnold right after Vallé went. I regret that, though the old lady is discretion itself, and she would have known anyway. It's weird the way gossip seeps into her quiet house and is bottled up. If there should be an explosion there at any time, good Lord! Brian, I'd want to be out of line."

"There won't be," Brian comforted. "I was up there the other night and she calmly asked me to bring Vallé to call, quite as if we could make an engagement for next week. Lord! I wish we could."

Ivas winced, then changed the subject.

"Father is suffering horribly, Brian. Suffers stupidly, helplessly. Being old and worsted in the fight, he just backs up against the wall and takes his blows dumbly. My heart aches for him, although—well, Brian, even if Vallé is my sister, it could help no one now to blazon the fact abroad. Father will right it as far as he can, privately. His will, you know, has been changed."

At this Brian winced. "I must have a talk with him about that," he said quietly.

"I wish you would take Father into your confidence." Then: "Brian," suddenly.

"Yes, Ivas."

"That man Kemel Trench—do you know, I wish we could turn him loose on Father. Father refers to him constantly. Calls him a soul surgeon—poor Father's only attempt at wit. He says he'd like to see how Trench would deal with certain things—such things as people tell only to priests. The cruelest hurt to Father, Brian, is my mother."

"It would be!" Brooke looked grim and turned his

eyes on Ivas. His ragged nerves at that moment tricked him—the resemblance between Vallé and Ivas was compelling. "Your mother and Vallé's," he continued slowly. "Yes—that would hurt the most. I wonder just what Trench would say about that. I wonder."

CHAPTER XVIII

THAT December was a month to remember. It came howling in and it had returning spells of cold, snow, and high wind that made the narrow streets between tall buildings places of discomfort and danger. It was no weather to fill the hearts of people with the Christmas spirit, nor the shops with bright-faced shoppers. There were dreadful reports of storms at sea and near-accidents. Ships came in, ice-coated and battered, and Brian hoped, with all the warring fervor of his heart, that Vallé would not sail from Italy now. He had not heard from her in a month.

On the 23d of December the weather seemed to crouch and gather strength for a fiercer attack than ever; it took on physical attributes of reasoning and mischief.

Barnard Lee went home earlier than was his habit that day. Business was dull, he felt utterly worn out and low-spirited. "Christmas!" he muttered. "God! what a travesty."

Ivas met her father in the hall. Oftener and oftener

now she was at home when he returned. His thin gray face made her heart ache. "No matter how well you deserve what gets you," she thought with a sad little smile, "when it gets you it's time for others to let up. Whatever stands for God, please take notice!"

"To-night," Lee said, shivering and letting Ivas help him with his coat—"to-night is a perfect night for one's own fireside and whatever stands for family." Then he looked about. "Lord! child, you've been decorating."

"Yes, Father. Nothing succeeds like success and nothing routs Fate like defiance." How hard they tried to cheer each other.

"Fate, indeed, Ivas. I hope you are not going to use that as a shield of defense."

"No, Father, just as a target. Come, dear, there's rather a splendid feast planned for just us two."

"Why didn't you ask Brian and Miss Moore?"

"Brian declined and Miss Moore has a bridge party on. I even went so far as to ask Keith Arnold. He is dining with his aunt."

"How that old lady persists!" Lee muttered—the blazing fire was getting past his frozen state.

"Yes, I ran up there to-day; took her a few books. She's a dauntless soul if there ever was one. She told me that she was so disgusted with the way Death was treating her that at times she felt like pushing the Door open herself and going in uninvited."

"She won't. None of us do unless we go a bit off.

It's amusing the excuses people make for not going in uninvited."

"Come, Father"—the two faced each other across the dazzlingly bright table—"a toast! I ran across it in one of the books I took up to Miss Arnold and it fits in: 'The wine of disaster strengthens the brave.' Here's to you, Father, and us all."

Lee lifted his glass.

At this same hour Keith Arnold sat opposite his aunt in her stately old room—a small, daintily laid table, quite festive, separated them.

"How gay we are!" Arnold looked around. "Who's been here since I went out to buy something for your stocking, Mary Jane?"

"Ivas Lee. She brought me some books and greens. She and Martin hung them. Ivas is a real flesh-and-blood creature and she is filled with the milk of human kindness."

Keith laughed and added: "Yes, and with a dash of the meddling female."

"Oh! well, meddling has its place if it isn't smutty. Your play—Keith, have you finished it?"

Arnold looked gloomy. "No. All but—— It's the *but* that gets me. If I make my woman act like a reasoning creature, producers will have nothing to do with her. They want women who interpret love in just one way—sex!"

Miss Arnold nodded. "I know it's a sex-drenched age, Son. Women are synthetic things now—no real spark in them of the divine. Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing, Mary Jane. Good Lord! I should say not. Here, my dear, are some white bits of turkey, and see that you eat every scrap."

"I will. With company I have a prodigious appetite. Put a good deal of turnip on my plate, Keith—despised vegetable I greatly admire; and do not be stingy with the onions. Thanks. Now, about the modern female—if one can call her female. She's composed largely of suppressed desires and dynamite and she hasn't the least conception how closely the two are related. And I don't agree with you, Keith, about producers in a lump. Some are what you say, but there are others with a dash of imagination and sporting spirit."

"Perhaps—now eat, Mary Jane, no dodging." Keith was eyeing Miss Arnold's nibbles. "And yet there's something rather splendid," he went on, "in a woman daring all for love and letting the devil go hang."

"That's the trouble. What *is* love and the devil never does go hang. That's the worst of it. It seems to me that most of such women as you are talking about haven't any brains. They think with their suppressed desires."

"Oh! well, Mary Jane, inspiration may grip me yet and I'll evolve a new Eve, one with the vital spark.

That is good, about your synthetic female. Come now, plum pudding! Go light on that, Mary Jane. And I see some onion under the turnip! We'll sit by the fire to-night and listen to the radio. How's that, Mary Jane?"

"You mean, Son, that you're going to stay with an old lady?"

"Just that. I wish I could have got Brian here to-night."

"Couldn't you?" Miss Arnold's keen eyes fixed themselves on Keith.

"No."

"What is he doing this—this hell of a night? Excuse my Old Saxon." Miss Arnold shuddered as a rising blast dashed heavy wet snow against the windows.

"I hope he's at home."

"Keith, pull down the shades and draw the curtains. I hope there'll be no SOS to-night for all concerned."

Brooke had eaten at a restaurant and gone home. The quiet, empty house was, at least, quiet and empty. There was no need for pretense. Christmas time was bad enough without having to acknowledge it openly. He went up to his own rooms and stood still at the doorway.

Someone had hung greens over the mantel and pictures. There was a smart fire crackling on the hearth

and the heavy curtains were drawn against the night that battered against the barrier.

"Ivas," thought Brooke, and then went to the windows and pulled the curtains apart. The storm, beating the wet snow against the glass, reminded him of Hedged In; not as he had seen it, lived in it, but as Vallé had. Then, indifferently, Brooke turned on the radio and sat down. "Even canned humanity is better that none," he muttered as he flung himself into a deep chair.

Suddenly the very soul of him seemed to listen. "And now, we have the honor and pleasure of introducing to our unseen audience to-night two new artists. Artists who will, we are sure, make their way at once into your hearts. Whether you are listening in from some summer-like clime, or trying to forget the storm in a bleaker place, you will all enjoy the rare treat we offer. We will first have a violin solo by Mr. Stephen Tremaine, accompanied at the piano by Miss Vallé Tremaine, his niece. Later Miss Tremaine will sing some Christmas carols."

Static snapped and crackled, but five people sat rigidly waiting! Then the notes of Stephen Tremaine's violin came clear and beautifully, exquisitely true over the air. Stephen, alone with his violin, unhampered by his own infirmities, was reaching out to his unseen audience. His soul sought theirs in gratitude, hope, and yearning. He played on and on until the number came

to a triumphant close—not an uncertain note. The storm even seemed silenced.

"You will hear Mr. Tremaine again after Miss Vallé Tremaine sings an old English Christmas carol." The announcer's voice had a relieved tone! His new artist had proved himself; he had no doubts now.

Barnard Lee and Ivas looked into each other's faces helplessly. It was nerve-straining, unearthly.

Keith Arnold looked at his aunt, and after a moment of surprised interest she smiled over the things that do not matter and those that do. Her long-sighted vision saw more than her lips dared utter. "Bravo!" was all she said.

But Brian Brooke, while Stephen Tremaine played, had sat like a dead man—white and tense. Now he bent forward, his face covered by his hands, waiting; waiting. In some God-given way he felt that now he was to *know*. In this fashion Vallé was to speak to him.

The announcer was again on the air: "Miss Vallé Tremaine has chosen a carol not so well known as many, but very beautiful: 'Noël, Noël.' Mr. Tremaine is at the piano."

A moment's pause—then Vallé's voice:

"Noël, Noël.
This sounds each Christmas bell
Across the winter snow.

But what are the little footprints all
That mark the path from the churchyard wall—
These are those of the children waked to-night
From sleep by the Christmas bells and light."

Brian did not move, but joy broke over his face. Vallé had spoken to him; he understood. The little child that had never been, but who, to him and Vallé, would always be, their little child, had "wakened from sleep," had come to them.

Vallé was singing on as if the unseen audience were clamoring for more: "Holy Night," "Little Town of Bethlehem"—the sweet voice that could so reach the heart rose above the storm and darkness. But all that Brian heard was, "Noël, Noël . . . across the winter snow."

The announcer was again speaking: "We would deeply appreciate letters from our unseen audience. Address such to the station to which you are listening. Your announcer is Paul Heath. Good-night and Merry Christmas."

Brooke did not move for a moment, then he got up and went to the window and pulled the curtains back. A massive building, tapering to the sky, sprang suddenly into blazing beauty—glorious contribution of genius to the Holy Night. Church bells were filling the air; the storm had fallen into quiet at last. Brooke

looked at the city of care, trouble, joy, and hope. The beautiful city.

Miss Arnold, her grave eyes filled with vision, said slowly: "It looks as if you might get some inspiration about that woman of yours in the play, Son. Will *you* write to the station to which you have been listening?"

"No—I shall wait."

"Well, that won't ruin anything. Inspiration is stubborn. Come now, Son, help me to bed. Lord! but I am tired. No, do not turn the music off—that Tremaine man is playing. He plays like—like something set free."

"Ivas." Lee kept his face turned away.

"Yes, Father."

"Perhaps you'd better write to—to your sister and uncle."

"That's sporting of you, darling, but I shall wait."

"Perhaps that is wiser. May I repeat your compliment, my—my child? 'That's sporting of you'!"

Alone in his rooms in the tall, narrow house Brooke felt a flood of deep joy overwhelming him.

"I will not have long to wait," he thought, and lifted his face to the tower of light.

THE END